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Here's how



MAGAZINE

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by HARRY F. OLMSTED

FROM HELL TO TEXAS

by ED EARL REPP

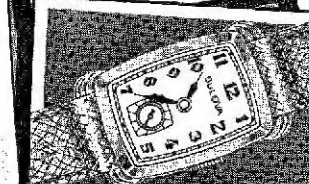




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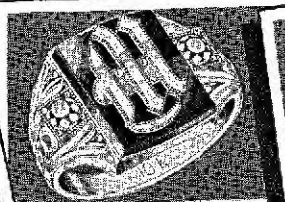
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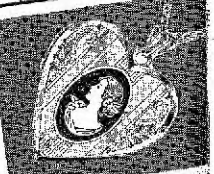
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(Two Big Book-Length Novels)

LOST CITY OF DESERT DEATH.....HARRY F. OLMSTED 6

Across the trackless Mexican desert, a prison-branded outcast led his tenderfoot caravan, to a lost Aztec temple of gold—where the stone god of a vanished race waited for the sacrificial offering of a white woman's blood!

FROM HELL TO TEXAS.....ED EARL REPP 54

Up North they called Duffy Kildaire a hero. But he was a traitor, in any man's language, when he rode home to Texas, after Appomattox—to fight for the doomed boom-town that had disowned him!

(A Short Action Novel)

MAN-TAMER OF BUSHWHACK RANGE.....H. S. M. KEMP 116

They were paying gun-wages on the Circle M. . . . And Colt-swift Pete Wallace, the drifter, was one man who could earn his keep on a bushwhack range—even if he had to wage single-handed war against his own killer boss!

(Three Short Stories of the Cow Country)

A LIFE FOR PADRE JULIAN.....JACK BLOODHART 41

A padre saved Outlaw Dallas' life, with an offer of sanctuary from the law. In his turn, would Dallas risk a watery Boathill—to rescue the badgemen who sought his hide?

THE TINHORN DEATH FORGOT.....DON HUNTLEY 92

At the gates to Hell, there waited the son Flint Barslow had spurned—to watch and smile, while hot lead chopped down the father who had only honor left for which to die!

WHIZZER RIDES TO WAR!.....HAPSBURG LIEBE 104

A fresh, headstrong kid insisted on collecting the debt that young Boss Harrison owed him—to the last drop of his own fighting blood!

(Four Western Fact Articles)

WILDERNESS SADDLEMATES.....DOUGLAS NELSON RHODES 50

A big-boned farm boy won Kit Carson's undying friendship—with a blow to Kit's jaw!

LAWMAN, GAMBLER, FIGHTING MAN!.....DAVE SANDS 107

Bucky O'Neill went hunting Arizona adventure—with a law book and a sixgun!

HORSEMEN OF DAMNATION.....GRAHAM R. McMURRAY 111

With a salute to reckless courage—and the dashing bandits it led to an early death!

TOUGHER THAN RATTLESNAKES.....LLOYD E. BARBER 122

He left the golden city he had founded—to die alone, still seeking the dust that had bought and sold his soul!

(Editorial)

SMOKY TRAIL AHEAD..... 4

(Department)

ROUND-UP..... 12

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE NOVEMBER 1

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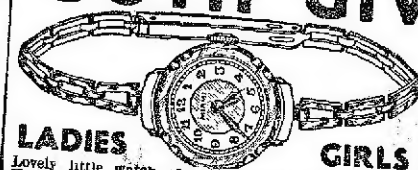
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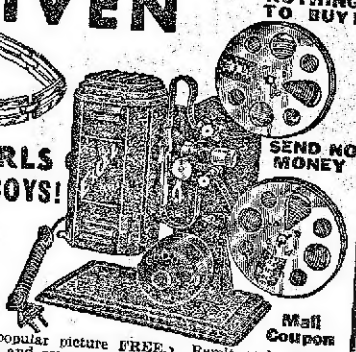
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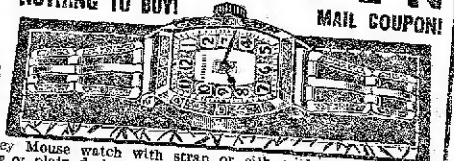
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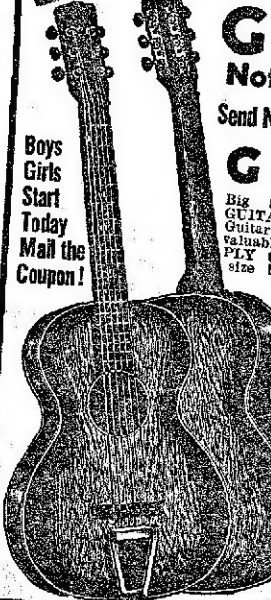


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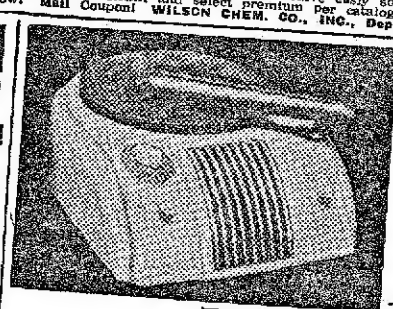
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SMOKY TRAIL AHEAD

KIP McCUEN was no outlaw. He had no reason to fear the accusing glances and comments that greeted him when he rode into Long Ridge. He was only a rancher who knew when he was licked. He was a man who was smart enough to drop out of the fight against the Kessler Pool, up in the Rio Seco.

But it hurt and puzzled him to hear his name spoken, in a tone that hinted of anger, by a pretty girl he had never seen before. He was hanging his saddle on a rack in the Long Ridge livery stable, when she rode up to the front for a word with the barn man. And then he heard her speak his name.

He stepped quickly to the door, his rust-flecked eyes wide with surprise. The girl's eyes found him, lashed at him contemptuously. Then she put her sorrel about and sent it thundering out the gate and along the town's dusty street.

McCuen couldn't figure it. This was more than a hundred miles from his old Rio Seco ranch; he had never been here before, had never seen the girl. He turned inquiring eyes on old Jim Orr, the stable man.

Orr sauntered forward, his bony face blank. "Still want your horse grained, McCuen?" he asked coolly.

The tall rider reddened, looked into the dust cloud which hid the girl and her sorrel, then back at Orr. "I still want my horse grained," he said levelly. "And I'd like to know—"

"Then grain he gets, Mister McCuen," Orr cut in.

Orr stepped past McCuen and into the run-way with an alacrity that belied his seamed features and gray hair. He had put enough emphasis on the word "Mister" to let McCuen know that he was about as welcome here as a smallpox epidemic.

McCuen's jaw clamped until muscles bulged beneath the smooth tan of his skin. He jerked his hat on almost savagely, and his long legs carried him swiftly across the corral. He reached the gate and was going through when coarse laughter boomed along the street ahead of him.

The girl had halted her sorrel at one of the hitchracks, and was standing in the dust beside the horse, trying desperately to free her slim right wrist from the hand of a big red-haired fellow who laughed mockingly down into her flushed face. A pliant quirt was clutched in the girl's imprisoned hand.

McCuen ran toward them, down the hard dirt walk. He saw the girl's left hand flash up, pluck at the quirt, try desperately to slide the loop of it free from her right wrist.

The big man's laughter grew louder, and his left arm slid around the girl's slim shoulders. "You larruped me acrost the head with your damned quirt, with half the loafers in town lookin' on, Miss Hell-cat," he boomed. "And now you'll pay for that little stunt. I'm kissin' you, with all these gents watchin'."

Kip McCuen pushed through the crowd of

grinning men who stood watching. His long right arm shot out. Between the first and second fingers of his right hand he caught the ample nose of the red-head. His hand and forearm rolled sidewise as he wrenched sharply.

The big red-head released the girl, howling in agony. He flung up his powerful arms, trying to grab his assailant. Grinning, McCuen held his grip on the man's nose, and brought his right knee up savagely into the burly one's heaving middle. The red-head's breath left his barrel chest with a gusty sound, and his thick legs gave way, letting him fall limply.

McCuen looked down at the fallen man, sizing him up for the first time. The man was obviously no ordinary cowpuncher. He wore an expensive broadcloth suit, and his boots were shop-made. The gold and silver plated spurs at the heels of those boots would have cost an ordinary cowpoke nearly a year's pay. The guns nestling in the hombre's holsters were beautifully engraved along the backstraps, and had genuine ivory grips.

McCuen stooped, slipped the two guns from their fancy holsters. He opened the loading gates and emptied them of cartridges.

"These guns," he observed quietly, "are too good to be tossed around in the dirt." He turned lazily. "Here, fella," he said, offering the fancy six-shooters to a seedy looking man in the crowd. "Hand 'em back to the big gent when he gets his wind back."

The seedy one took the weapons gingerly. McCuen's sharp glance sought the girl. But she and her sorrel horse had vanished. McCuen felt a swift thrust of resentment, and stood looking along the street.

A half-smothered yell behind him, and the solid sound of a heavy tread, caused him to whirl. But he never completed the swift turn. Something struck savagely along the side and top of his head. He felt his legs go weak, and knew only hazily that he was falling. . . .

That was Kip McCuen's introduction to Long Ridge. And it is your introduction to the dashing, hard-hitting hero of one of the two book-length novels scheduled for the next issue of *Big Book Western*—a saga of back-to-the-wall cowmen on a gun-ruled range, written by Lee Bond. The episode above is taken from Lee's story.

Hairy F. Olmsted is the author of the second long novel, a smashing epic of the historic Alder Gulch timber feud. Also, there will be a wide variety of shorter stories of the Old West's danger trails.

THE EDITOR

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?

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Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

Charles Atlas

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novel of high
adventure in
Old Mexico



Out of the trackless Mexican desert rose the Fuente Grande temple of Aztec doom, built on the side of a mountain of gold . . . To this last lost stronghold of a vanished race, Arch Courier led his tender-foot caravan—to learn why no white man, or woman, had ever left Fuente Grande alive!

LOST CITY OF DESERT DEATH

By HARRY F. OLMSTED



Netta wrenched her arm free, brought it up under his gun as it spat fire.

Chapter I

BACKTRAIL FOR A JAILBIRD

SIX months of freedom had done nothing to restore the carefree good nature that had once been the dominant characteristic of Arch Courier. Instead, it had but added to the sullenness,

the bitterness of spirit engendered by five dragging years in that hell hole at the mouth of the Gila River—Yuma Prison. Five years of torment, slaving under a cruel sun, sweltering at night in the barred rock catacombs, living on slop too foul to feed a mangy dog. And all because he had killed a human polecat he had found breaking a woman with his hands.

True, reflected Arch, as he stirred his bony crowbait along the winding road through the creosote weed, he hadn't known the woman. Nor had she asked him for help. She had been too far gone for that. Maybe he should have ridden past and closed his eyes to such brutality. But that would have made him someone else—not Arch Courier. It hadn't helped any that his victim was drawing pay from the biggest politician in the Yavapai country. So he had served his time, counting himself lucky that it hadn't been worse. The worst hadn't come until after his discharge.

"Wait till you get out," old Lonzo Luther had told him in the prison. "Nobody will give you a chance. You'll butt yore head ag'in' closed doors an' be told polite to go starve to death. You'll stand it so long, then you'll go outside the law just to be able to live. An' they'll have you back here, pronto. I'm in for life, an' I reckon I'm luckier'n you."

At the time, Arch had considered that just talk—his cell mate salving his own misery. "I'll take my chances outside," he had answered, optimistically. "If I get far enough away from here, they'll never know I've been behind stone walls."

"Think not?" Lonzo had chuckled acridly. "They brand you here, son. It will show on yore face an' out of your eyes. One look at you, after you leave here, an' a gent will opine he can't find nothin' for you to do . . . sorry. Nope, you can't run away from five years here, Arch. But before you go, I'll write you a letter to a good friend of mine. A man that won't ask no questions, who'll find work that you can

do best an pay you honest an' fair for it. Go to him when you're up against it, an' tell him Lonzo Luther sent you."

How true old Lonzo's words had been, regarding the prison brand. For six long months Arch had been living from hand to mouth, begging in vain for honest work and the chance to restore his confidence and pride. And now, hungry, ragged, desperately discouraged, he was riding to San Gorgonio . . . and Killian Blench.

SAN GORGONIO lay a mile ahead, lifting its unlovely head like a scaly lizard from the burning border sands. For the hundredth time, Arch got out the letter to Killian Blench and read it. In homely range lingo, it commended the bearer, Arch Courier, as a good man who could be trusted to keep his mouth shut and do a business-like job of tracking a danger trail.

Somehow, it seemed like a poor hook on which to hang his hopes of a decent job. Even as he rode into the environs of the somnolent adobe village, he could imagine Killian Blench's curt but polite excuses. It was always the same. The prison brand was on him, burned deep and indelible.

In the center of the town, where the road along the Border crossed the one leading northward across the Line from Hermosillo, Arch reined his crowbait to a rack, dismounted and walked into the Cantina Allegro. The place was dim and cool and redolent of sour maguey beer. The fat, sleepy *cantinero* opened one eye and squinted at him.

"*Que hay, señor?* What would you have?"

"Tequila," said the ragged man, and tossed one of his last three nickels to indicate the quality. He flipped salt on the back of his hand, took it off with his tongue and swallowed the nasty-tasting *lechuguilla*. Then, shuddering: "Where can a man find Blench—Killian Blench?"

"Ah-h-h!" The Mexican came alive. "Señor Blench . . . yes. She ees the beeg

man of thees town, the *gran rico*. You find heem, I theenk, at the beeg general store."

"Store?" Arch scowled.

"Sí, señor."

"Hell," muttered Arch. "What a dash I'll cut working in a store."

He was hardly aware he had spoken out loud until the Mexican rubbed his thick palms together, beaming. "Oh-h-h, I see. You work for Meester Blench, eh? *Bueno*. Eef you do not like the store, maybe you like a bank, eh? Or a mine? Or the beeg-est ranch een the county, no? Or maybe you would tend bar, like me. *Por dios*, eet makes no difference; Señor Blench owns them all. *Si*, and more too. Very so reech, thees man. He have plenty kind of job for you. What you do, eh?"

"They say," answered Arch, with vast bitterness, "that I kill. You understand me? Cut throats and the like of that."

And with the saloon keeper staring strangely after him, he walked out into the bright, hard glare of the street. A hundred yards down the walk a swinging sign invited him. It said:

SAN GORGONIO MERCANTILE CO.
ALMACEN DE ROPAS Y MERCANCIA.

Killian Blench's name was printed beneath. With one sweeping look, Arch saw the same name in three other places—the bank, a big saloon and on second floor windows proclaiming the offices of the "Blench Investment Company—Lands, Mines and Live stock." Truly, this man carried plenty of weight in San Gorgonio. He'd have about as much time for a smudgy, penciled note from a lifer in Yuma Prison, or a drifting derelict from that devil's corral, as he would for the smallpox. With jaws locked grimly and the old chip perched precariously on his shoulder, Arch set his sights toward the store.

HIS boots had not pounded the walk more than a dozen strides when a shrill yell smote his ears. A leaping figure hurtled

out from the narrow vault between two buildings, darting straight at Arch. It was a ragged, mahogany-colored urchin, warped and misshapen, with a seamed face as old and bitter as the basalt hills. Terror lurked in the glance he flung at Arch, and from his lips spewed a desperate plea for help, in border Spanish.

The strange gnome-like diminutive flung himself at Arch's legs, circled them with skinny arms as he put Arch between himself and the burly man who came leaping to the walk in pursuit. Broad, meaty, towering, the man paused there with a poised blacksnake whip. His thick lips were curled back over snaggy teeth; his breath came in rasping gusts. He seemed not to see Arch Courier as he fixed his beady glare on the cowering boy.

"Come outa that an' get yore needin's, you misshapen son of a snoopin' she-coyote!" he blared. "I'm cuttin' the hide offa you, teachin' you not to nose into my business, you thievin' little greaser! Get out from behind there!"

He sent the lash curling out, cracking it scant inches from Arch's thigh.

"Hold on, neighbor," warned Arch, who had witnessed that sort of punishment at Yuma and abhorred it. "Cool down an'—"

"Cool down, hell! Come outa that, you lousy little Spick. Come out, I say, you damned greaser!"

The whip slashed out, and the boy shifted position and darted away. The blacksnake bit into Arch's leg. Then the bullying whip-wielder was running after the boy. He caught him in the center of the dusty street. The loop of his swinging lash caught the youngster's feet, jerked them out from under him, deposited him on his face in the dust. Then he stood over his victim, his arm rising and falling, his flow of profanity blasting out the pitiful cries of the boy.

Arch, still feeling the sting of that whip, lost whatever restraint experience might

have endowed him with. He launched himself across the interval, caught the up-lifted blacksnake and tore it from the big man's grasp. Hurling it away, he whirled the bigger man around with his left hand and drove his right fist squarely into the giant's broad face.

The blow rocked the man back on his heels, fighting to remain upright. A roar guttered from his wide mouth as he caught his balance. Arch braced himself for the charge he knew would come.

The boy was up, scuttling away with a twisted, crab-like gait. His shrill warning filtered through the murmur of the gathering crowd:

"Look out, señor! That *cabron*, Saul Baggs, she keel you!"

Nor was that warning misplaced. To make a direct frontal charge was not the way of Mister Saul Baggs. He swayed forward, his face contorted with hate. His hand plummeted and his long-barreled Colt was sliding from its leather.

Knowing all at once what he was up against, Arch drove his hand to his own gun, but he was behind and he knew it.

A rock, thrown by the savage little Mexican boy, thudded against the thick chest of Saul Baggs. It distracted him for an instant. That was all Arch Courier needed. Two guns blazed almost as one. Something plucked at Arch's side, leaving a stinging sensation as though a hornet had lanced him between the ribs.

Arch fired again. The animal desperation, the unreasoning hatred on the other man's features suddenly underwent a violent alchemy. For one breathless clock-tick, his face reflected shock and pain. Then he fell forward, and his sudden cry trailed off into the gurgling, throaty sound that means the arrival of death.

Arch let his pistol lower. An awed silence gripped the crowd that had gathered. And through that hush came the purposeful, ominous beat of approaching footsteps. There was the sound of shotgun hammers

clicking back in the torrid quiet. "All right, stranger!" barked a commanding voice. "Drop the smokepole and elevate the dewclaws!"

Arch whirled, found himself looking into the ugly bores of a sawed-off scattergun. Pinned to the vest of the gaunt, gray man who held the shotgun, was a five-pointed star of the law.

Arch's shoulders sagged and he dropped the pistol. As his hands went up, he silently cursed. He had gone and done it again. He had let sentiment sway him into the very sort of thing that had sent him to Yuma before. Hell, he hadn't even known what the trouble was about, yet he had killed a man over it. Maybe that crooked-shaped little Mex youngster had deserved a whipping.

Old Lonzo Luther had been right. Another man lay dead and...

"All right, Sheriff," he said, with resignation. "It was him or me, as any of these men can tell you. But if—"

"It was murder!" rapped the lawman, advancing and snapping on the bracelets. "I saw the whole thing. Cold-blooded murder. You'll swing for it. Get moving, mister. We're going to the jailhouse."

Chapter II

JOB FOR A GUNMAN

IN HIS ornate office at the bank, Killian Blench leaned back in his swivel chair and regarded the card of his caller. It read:

GAMALIEL DELANCEY SPARLING
A.M., Ph.D., & Sc.D.
F.R.G.S. F.A.A.E.

Though sitting at ease and at rest, this man of many interests, this mayor of San Gorgonio and dictator of its surrounding ranges, was by no means one to be passed by with a single look. He was inordinately tall, so thin of frame and gaunt of face as to remind one of some long-buried occupant of a graveyard. His long black frock

coat hung from his sharp shoulders like a dead monk's cassock. His skin looked ages old, like the covering of a saddle long exposed to the weather. Yet it was said that he was little over forty.

His long-fingered hand, holding the card, looked like a skeleton claw. The ensemble made a picture of death, belied only by his eyes. They alone were alive—big and luminous, like two coals burning in a mummy's skull. They were predatory, like his long, thin nose, cynical and watchful. The ghost of a smile twisted his flat, fleshless lips.

"Gamaliel Delancey Sparling," he read, spacing the words. "Doctor of the alphabet, eh?"

"Quite . . . Ha, ha." The slight, delicately molded man across the desk indulged in faint humor. "Strange, isn't it, that they burden a small man like me with all those titles. With all the rest I have to carry. . . ."

"Just what is your particular business, Doctor Sparling? And how can I serve you?"

The scientist breathed on his glasses and polished them with a silk handkerchief. "I'm an archeologist and ethnologist, Mister Blench. I'm doing some research in Mexico and I have been referred to you as one who could help me get an outfit together. Saddle animals, pack mules, supplies and a few men who will be good hands on a shovel."

"I see." Blench stroked his long, lean jaw. "Humph. What part of Mexico?"

The little man was looking straight at him, but his eyes were far away, unseeing. A fervent gleam lit his pale eyes. "On the Mesa Muerte, sir. According to my map it lies at the south edge of the San Luis Desert. There, if reports are to be believed, lies the ancient city of Fuente Grande, northernmost outpost of the Aztec hierarchy. You see, I am being sent down by the American Academy of Ethnology to check on artifacts obtained through trade and said to originate in Fuente Grande.

Like this. . . ." From his pocket he drew an exquisite golden miniature—a three-handled urn of the most delicate workmanship, inscribed with dainty hieroglyphics.

The gaunt hand of Killian Blench folded over the piece and he seemed to caress it as he examined it at close range. A strange tightness came to his lips and his eyes burned with a hotness that might have been avarice.

"Nice," he muttered, "mighty nice. Who brought this out, Doctor?"

"Really, I cannot say, Mister Blench. It is a trade piece, I judge, with an intrinsic value of perhaps a hundred dollars, not more. Yet, to me—" a fierce hunger was reflected upon Sparling's face "—to me, its value is inestimable. If it proves, sir, that Fuente Grande contains more such specimens, I have proved my theory that the civilization accredited to the Aztec really came from the East, and not the Northwest. You can see the vast importance of this thought, Mister Blench. It means a migration from the sinking Atlantean bridge, bringing culture to the Toltec and in time absorbing him."

BLENCH smiled at the little urn. "You read all that on this piece?" he asked.

"That and more," exclaimed the little man, under full sail on the sea of his enthusiasm. "Those characters speak of a peaceful folk, ethnologically related to the Egyptian, yet differing from him, as we deduce by a comparison with the Mayan, in Yucatan and Campeche. To prove that this urn, or others like it, came from Fuente Grande—that is my problem, Mister Blench. If true, then it is plain that the influx of an Asiatic people from the Northwest in the Fourteenth Century added no culture, as we have believed in the past, but rather infused the peaceful Aztec with fighting blood, making him the composite who bowed to Cortez. You see it?"

"I see," said Blench again, without en-

thusiasm. "And you want me to outfit you for the trip?"

"I shall be very happy if you can, sir."
"How many in your party?"

"Just my daughter, Netta, and myself."
"Your daughter?" Blench's face came alive.

"Oh you need have no concern for her, Mister Blench. She is a trained archaeologist, used to being dragged around with me. Egypt, Cambodia, Africa, New Mexico, Chile, Yucatan, Honduras . . . she's been everywhere with me, since she was so high. Fearless and—"

"I've heard of Fuente Grande," Blench murmured. He had settled back, resuming his dead pan expression. "Legends, yarns, exaggerations maybe, but where there's smoke there's usually flame."

"What do you mean?" The doctor sat up straight. "Flame?"

"Danger, Doctor. They say Fuente Grande is bewitched, peopled by the spirits of a race long dead. The Devil, they say, stalks those ruins on moonlit nights, luring men in which to plant his evil spirits. . . ."

"Go on," breathed the doctor. "What else?"

Blench shook his head. "It's all a lot of hokum, of course. But it seems that men disappear down there, are never heard of again. And certain ones have claimed to have seen their missing relatives about the ruins. Then there's the usual clap-trap about rattling chains, cries in the night and strange flares lighting the ancient place. I don't take any stock in it, myself—" he pursed his lips—"but I tell it for what it's worth. There may be danger."

"I'll chance it, Mister Blench." The doctor was beaming. "I have an idea it may be a story grounded on the will of someone to keep people away; someone, let us say, who digs for these urns and other priceless artifacts. I must get there before such vandals ruin a great truth for posterity."

A shrill screech struck into the room,

eerie, paralyzing—a scream of doom. Sparling bounced to his feet, paling. "What's that?"

Blench listened to the growing murmur of sound from the street, waved the scientist into his seat. "Some trouble outside, apparently," he said. "Nothing to get excited over. We get used to violence here, Doctor. You're not in Boston, you understand. Now, to get back, you'll need a few men along who know how to handle guns. If you should run into anything in Fuente Grande—"

The double roar of a gun cut him off, and again Sparling reared to his feet. Almost instantly there was another gun blast, followed by a moment's silence, and then a confused clamor.

Blench shrugged. "Just a little shooting match," he chuckled, "and another job for the undertaker. Where you come from, Sparling, it's live and let live. Out here it's kill or be killed. Now I'll tell you what you do. Come in and see me tomorrow at this time. Meanwhile, I'll look after gathering an outfit for you. I'll have all the figures ready. Happy to have met you, Doctor, and good day."

He took the scientist's limp hand in his, led him to the door.

WHEN Sparling was gone, Blench appeared in the bank lobby. His voice echoed harshly. "What was that ruckus on the street, Ben?"

The teller, making his way back to the wicket, turned a white face and frightened eyes to him. "Why . . . er . . ."

Before he could stammer his explanation, the outer door swung inward to admit the grim-faced sheriff. He paused abruptly, his eyes writhing with the fear most men felt in the presence of Blench.

"Killian—" he began, but the cadaverous banker cut him off.

"Out with it, Sam! What was the shoot-in' about?"

Sheriff Sam Tarrant lowered his head

and moved resolutely toward him. "In your office, Killian," he muttered. "It's bad news."

Closed in Blench's office, with cigars lighted, the lawman said, "It's Saul Baggs, boss."

"Baggs? What's he done now?"

"He's cashed his chips, Killian."

"Dead? How? Who?"

Tarrant told what he knew about the shooting and the facts leading up to it. " . . . Says his name is Courier—Arch Courier. A striper, out of Yuma Prison. And he's good, plenty good. Took the whip away from Saul, slugged him in the face an' then killed him when Saul went for his gun. Saul had all the edge, but that's all the good it did him."

Blench eyed him with a burning glance, stroking his lank jaw. Tarrant watched him nervously, waiting for his emotions to erupt.

"Humph! The best man I had, Baggs," murmured the banker, hollowly. "Where is this Courier now?"

"I'm holding him for murder. And, by the way, boss, he handed me this note an' asked me to see that you got it. From some jailbird name uh Lonzo Luther."

"Luther!" Blench leaned far over to snatch the smudged paper. He read it hurriedly, then read it again. A faint smile touched his lips. "Fetch him here, Sam. I want to talk to that badger."

"I—I'm scairt the people will demand a

hangin', account of what he done, Killian. It was purty cold-blooded."

"To hell with the people! They had their show, didn't they? 'Tain't every day they can see a Saul Baggs shot down. From what you tell me, this Courier taken his choice of livin' an' dyin'. An' that's no choice at all. It was self-defense, an' the judge will find it so . . . if I give the word. But, first, I want to see this man. Fetch him here."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Arch Courier sat across the desk from the strangest looking man he had ever laid eyes on. The sheriff had been unceremoniously dismissed. They were alone.

"Pretty fast on the trigger, ain't you, young man?" Blench said.

"A man gets fast in a case like that," said Arch. "Or they bury him."

"Some argue," droned the boss, the walls giving back the hollow reverberations of his voice, "that the bullet is quicker and more merciful than the rope."

"I wouldn't know. I'll take my chances as they come up."

"You killed the best man I've got," said Blench, condemningly. "And the fanciest shot. He won't be easy to replace."

Arch grinned challengingly. "He drew the losing hand with me. That ought to make me a better man. Won't I do?"

"You might," murmured Blench, and his eyes lit with a strange, intermittent fire. "Of course you would have to prove the



point. Do you savvy mules, Courier?"

"As good as most. I can make 'em understand my cussin'."

"Speak Spanish?"

"Like a native."

"Old Lonzo, one of the best men I ever had before he fell foul of the law, says you're a good man. Does that mean you can take orders from your boss and go through hell and high water to do what you're told?"

"If I'm treated like a human being, yes."

"Can you do what you're told an' keep your mouth shut about it afterward?"

"For a boss that's square with me, I can."

"Good!" Blench came up to pace the floor with inordinately long strides. "I can use you."

"Doing what?"

A dry laugh rattled from the spectral boss. "Impatient, ain't you? Well, you will know in good time. Enough now to say it will be something profitable to you and more profitable to me. But first I will have to put you to a test." A far-away look came into Blench's deep-sunk eyes. "There's a scientist in town, an hombre that digs in ancient graves. He and his daughter want to go to the San Luis Desert, a hundred miles south. They want me to outfit them for the trip."

"I shall put you in charge. You'll have a half dozen good men who know the country, a dozen saddlers and as many pack mules. Your job will be to make the doctor and his girl comfortable, protect them from any sort of danger, and get him where he's going and safely back. You will be boss, coming, and going, but while you're there Doctor Sparling will be in charge and you'll do whatever he asks. How does it sound?"

"Like a vacation," said Arch, with the beginning of enthusiasm; he had dreamed only of drudgery and never of adventure. "Do I get paid for that?"

"Five dollars a day and keep. If you

prove satisfactory, I'll give you a permanent job at a hundred a month—and more as you earn it. Satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory . . . an' thanks a lot."

"Not at all." Blench tossed a golden coin to the desk top. "Take that. Get yourself a room and a shave. Be here at this time tomorrow, when you'll meet the doctor. In the meantime, I'll see the coroner and fix you up with the law. Until then. . ."

His big hand folded Arch's with a vise-like grip. And, warm with the thought that there was a chance in the world after all, the man from Yuma Prison took his leave. Already he had made up his mind that, despite Blench's looks, he liked him.

Chapter III

GUIDE FOR THE DESERT

NEXT morning, when Arch stuck his head into Killian Blench's bank office, he found the boss in the presence of a gray, narrow-shouldered man and a young woman. Blench rose, motioned him in, his thin lips turned in something meant for a smile. "Come in, Courier. Come right in. We've been waiting for you."

"Observe," smiled Arch, with a glance at the desk clock, "I'm on time to the minute. Funny thing about a clock. It ticks away a man's life, yet he regulates his living by it."

A blankness, as of displeasure, crossed Blench's face. Then he was bowing. "Doctor, this is the man I spoke about. Courier, shake hands with Doctor Gamaliel Sparling. And meet his daughter—Netta."

Something of resentment welled up in Arch as he took the dead-fish hand of the scientist and heard his low, almost feminine acknowledgment. Then he was turning to bow to the girl. There was no courtesy here, not even civility. She took one backward step and drew herself very straight. Her gray eyes flashed rebelliously at him; her lips pressed into a tight, white line. She

stood stiffly in her shiny, Russian leather boots; she wore a split buckskin skirt, a man's plaid flannel shirt open at the throat, and new gauntlets. Some inner turmoil had whipped fresh color into her cheeks and the amber hair of her head sat loosely around temples and the long column of her neck. Altogether, she made a sturdy, confident and graceful picture to this man who had traveled a lonely and womanless trail. But he didn't like the look in her eyes.

He said, "I'm glad to know you," and saw her cringe.

"I—I'm sorry I cannot say the same," she replied, making no attempt to mask her bitterness.

"Netta!" reproved her father. "What are you saying?"

"This is the man I was telling you about, father," she said tartly. "As I came out of the hotel yesterday, I saw him assault another man in the street, strike him in the face with his fist, almost knock him down and then shoot him to death with his gun. A murderer, and you—" she turned savagely on Killian Blench—"you ask us to trust ourselves to his tender mercies. It's terrible."

A look of death came into Blench's skull-like face and his eyes seemed to recede until the sockets looked empty. "The young lady," he said heavily, "will do well to remember that this is a man's world. Down here, one rates not by his parlor polish but by his ability to take care of himself and those in his charge."

"A man's world," she echoed scornfully. "And he is a shining example of the kind that survives. Why, I wouldn't dare sleep at night for fear he might cut my throat before morning. A man's world, indeed!"

"You do me wrong," said Arch. "What was I supposed to do? Let him kill me?"

THE girl glared at him, letting the silence pile up. Chin lifted in scorn, lips pursed, she scanned him as if to look beneath the surface and divine his true worth.

And suddenly the fire went out of her. She relaxed, shrugged and threw her hands wide.

"Let it go. After all, I'm just going along on this expedition. It's a man's world, just as you said, Mister Blench, and men will run it. I've given you the facts. If it was left to me, this man would be in jail, awaiting trial for murder. He was in jail yesterday, and he's free as the wind today. You explain it."

"A coroner's jury exonerated him," Blench murmured. "Self-defense. You've got the boy all wrong, Miss Netta. Surely, you wouldn't want me to send you out with a lily-fingered, turn-the-other-cheek gentleman. You're going into a wild, hard country, where all the signs point to trouble. Of course, if you want to go down there with a crew of strange Mexicans and take your chances. . ."

"No, no!" Gamaliel Sparling waved his thin arms. "We'll have to put ourselves in your hands, Mister Blench. What Netta thinks of Mister Courier is immaterial and must not stand in our way of success. Go right ahead. Courier suits me, if you vouch for him. Let our contract stand as it is. When will we start?"

"We'll be packed and ready to move day after tomorrow, after breakfast. I'll send a wagon for your luggage. I'm providing equipment for nine and food for thirty days. If you stay longer, Courier will return with the mules. If you think of anything else, come see me."

He opened the door and Netta stalked stiffly out, her face a little sullen. Arch stared hungrily after her.

"See me in the morning, Courier," said Blench.

Then Arch and Gamaliel Sparling were in the bank lobby, silently following the girl outside. When they reached the street, Netta was just entering the hotel. Arch watched until the portal engulfed her. He was hardly aware of the presence of the little scientist, until the man's finger sank into his bicep, with unguessed pressure.

Arch was startled to find Sparling fiercely alive, his absent mindedness cast off.

"Courier," he said, clipping the words, "I have overridden a woman's intuition in agreeing to let you guide us. I am putting my whole faith in Killian Blench. But I want you to understand that, in accepting you, I am not encouraging familiarity. I saw you look after Netta when she left Blench's office. And again just now. It won't do, Courier. You will tend to business and leave her strictly alone. You understand me?"

"Perfectly," said Arch, unable to rid his voice of his resentment. "The trip will be pretty dull if that's all you can find to worry about."

He watched Sparling cross the street, with mixed feelings of anger and hurt pride. Somehow, the lure of the adventure lying ahead did not pulse quite so robustly through him. The spring sun's impact was not quite so warming.

IN THE office Arch had just quitted, Killian Blench stood in a deep study, his fixed stare on the door. Standing there, his wide shoulders stooped, his long arms hanging, he looked like a great black buzzard, waiting and listening. The attitude persisted until the echo of footsteps came through the rear wall. The sound drew him erect, spun him around. A knock rattled the rear panel—a strange knock, low and vibrant, like the beat of distant savage drums.

Blench moved across the room, shot a heavy bolt and opened the door. A figure stepped in and the door slammed shut. The bolt shot home and Blench stood staring down at a lithe, hawk-faced brown man who knelt before him, touching his forehead to the floor, murmuring words in a breathy, slurring dialect.

"All right, Cuitenoc. Get up."

When the man had risen, and seated himself on the edge of a chair, staring at the banker with zealous, worshipful eyes,

Blench said, "At the hour of the rising sun, after tomorrow's sun, you will join my *arrieros*. You will be the guide, leading them to Tlascuco—our holy city that men now know as Fuente Grande. Let there be night alarms perhaps, but no trouble. When you reach Tlascuco, the white man heavy with years shall be turned over to Cactecoatl, the goldsmith, who will know how to use one who is sent by Heaven. Let the girl be taken to the Woman's Quarters in the Tecpan and treated well, understand? Presently I shall follow you and there shall be ceremonials."

Blench spoke in the breathy Azteco, interspersed with Spanish. The man before him said no word, just nodding to indicate his understanding. Finally, when his instructions were complete, he scuttled swiftly to the door and awaited the opening of the panel, like a cat. Blench let him out.

When the man was gone and the door bolted behind him, the San Gorgonio boss laughed. It was no more than a silky whisper of mirth and an almost gleeful shaking of his lean stomach muscles.

"The poor fools!" he cackled. "The poor damn fools!"

Chapter IV

THE DEVIL'S CAVALCADE

ARCH COURIER had eaten his breakfast fast before dawn, that morning of departure. He strode hurriedly to the Border Corral, down near the creek at the west edge of San Gorgonio. He was all ready. Such few effects as he had acquired for the trip had been made into a roll and piled with the rest of the goods at the corral, the night before.

In Arch was a keen appetite for the adventure. It would take him far away from surroundings that might remind him of his wasted years. True, there would be the annoyance of trying to serve the girl who so openly hated him. She was so lovely,

LOST CITY OF DESERT DEATH

though, that even that carried no sting for him. He'd make her change her opinion of him.

Turning through the dimly lighted feed barn, he walked into a scene of the utmost confusion. Horses whinnied and mules brayed. Men, dark figures in the first faint light, struggled with saddles and packs, cursing their long-eared, evil-tempered animals. Matt Conkling, whom Blench had introduced to Arch as the head muleteer, was stomping about, snapping orders. Arch didn't like his arrogant, caustic-tongued manner.

From out of the gloom came a young woman, with a black rebosa over her head. She paused to speak to a young muleteer, who turned from his packing to take her into his arms. Conkling's head swiveled toward them; then he strode over to them like a great cat. He caught the woman's shoulder, tore her away from her man and flung her to the ground. Her stifled, despairing cry lifted through the sudden silence and died abruptly as she bounced up and scuttled away. The young Mexican *arriero* said something and Conkling struck him in the face. A knife flashed in the dawn and Conkling's gun came from its sheathe. For a long moment the two men glared at each other, then the Mexican returned his weapon to its scabbard, spun about and resumed his packing.

Arch stood watching them, shaken with a swift return of the resentment that had got him into so much trouble in the past. Then Conkling's hard glance was striking at him, and the man moved purposefully toward him.

"Well," he snarled, pausing before Arch, "what the hell are you looking at?"

Arch smiled coldly. "At you, Conkling," he said icily. "And I don't like the looks of you, not any. You had no reason for striking that man. If it happens again, you'll answer to me. Next time you want to shove some of our party around, Conkling, you'll have to back it up with your gun."

Don't forget that. Don't ever forget it!" Conkling's eyes widened and his broad face flushed. "Says who, feller? Who the hell you think you are, anyway?"

"I'm Courier. And what I say goes, as you'll find out. Don't tell me you haven't heard of Courier. Go ask Saul Baggs."

"Saul Baggs?" Blood receded from Conkling's face and he recoiled a step, shuddering. "Courier? Good God, why didn't you say so?" He wheeled about and strode off. And thereafter his voice was repressed in volume and venom too.

THE packs were made ready, the animals loaded. Finally the crew took to the saddle. The cheery clangor of the bell mule brought out many of the townspeople to see the expedition off. At the hotel, Killian Blench was waiting with Gamaliel Sparling and Netta, both splendidly mounted. Though the girl only glanced at Arch and turned away in scorn, he could not but admire the brave figure she made as she smilingly shook hands with Blench, tossed her arm high and put her mount into a gallop along the street.

Blench roared his best wishes to the archaeologist, slapped his horse under way. Then he stood on the hotel porch, watching the outfit file past. When Arch, bringing up the rear, drew abreast, the man's sullen glance found him and he crooked his finger, moving out for a last word of caution.

"That girl don't like you, Courier," he said, a peculiar glint in his sunken eyes.

"Does that make any difference, Blench?"

The man's chuckle was like the rustling of dry leaves in the wind. "Not at all. In fact, it's the way I want it. Keep away from her. Put yourself out to make things comfortable for her and her father, but don't get intimate. You understand?"

Arch shrugged. "You're the doctor."

"Don't forget that point, Courier. You may see a lot of things you don't understand. Maybe some things you don't like."

In such cases, forget your own feelings and remember you're working for me. Do your job and prove your loyalty, and you're fixed for life. Interfere in things that don't concern you, and you'll wish you never were born. Good luck to you. Leave the mules to Conkling and the choice of trails to El Mudo, the mute one."

Arch nodded grimly, took one last look into those strange eyes and reined away. The banker gave him a strong feeling of distrust. There was something crazy about this thing that touched Arch's nerves with fingers of ice. Conkling was to run the mules and the mute one the route. What was he, Courier, supposed to be? Who was this El Mudo, who was to guide them? And what lay behind Blench's warning about the girl? A hundred questions deviled Arch during those first five miles, as he rode in the dust, his chin down, his brain reaching out for the answers.

When they had crossed the Border into Mexico, with the sun beating down upon them and the mules plodding doggedly along the trail, untended by the drowsing *arrieros*, one of the men slowed his pace and allowed Arch to pull alongside. He was Sonora Hayes, a rawboned, disreputable looking fellow with bitter, tight-pressed lips and sly gray eyes. The faintest suggestion of a smile crossed his face.

His down-curving mustache moved and soft words reached across: "You're a lucky jigger . . . an' again you ain't. Know anything about this country we're headin' into, Courier?"

Arch threw his weight to one stirrup and edged his horse closer. The whisper of the wind and the murmur of the cavalcade's leisurely pace muted his voice.

"How do you mean . . . lucky?"

"In pluggin' Baggs an' takin' Conkling by the back hair . . . an' comin' through hide-whole. That's luck, brother. Them boys are knowed as killers."

"I can believe it, Hayes," observed Arch. "And I'll admit to a certain amount of

luck. Just how do you figger then that I'm unlucky? I don't exactly get it."

HAYES withheld his answer, his pale eyes smouldering. He stared away into the heat-hazed distance and a look of bleakness came to his weathered cheeks. "You're in the army, feller. Try to quit this outfit an' you'll know what I mean."

"I joined up," Arch said, "because I figgered it was a break for me. But I signed no enlistment papers an' I'll be just as quick to pull out, if I don't like it."

"Others has reasoned it thataway, brother. Where are they at? Blench is a hard man, an' a thorough one. I come in here from Texas, not quite a year ago. I had a little bit of luck, like you had, an' Blench made it sound good. You think I liked to work with Baggs? You think I like Conkling, the ugly tempered devil? You think I haven't thought of getting out of this? But I've seen three fetched back an' tied down on ant hills. No thanks. I'll string along till. . . ." And he fell silent.

Presently a horseman came out of the brush ahead of them, spurring his horse up beside that of Matt Conkling. The head muleteer cast one sidelong glance at the man, a hawk-faced Indian who said no word. Nor did Conkling speak. He just nodded, and the two of them rode on in silence.

"Who's that?" demanded Arch.

Sonora Hayes pursed his lips. "That's a Tapoya Injun name uh El Mudo—the Mute—Injun name is Cuitenoc."

"Tapoya?"

"Yeah. The Tapoyas are one of the Aztec tribes, scattered when the Spaniards overran Mexico, several hundred years ago. I—I was hopin' Mudo wouldn't show up on this trip, for the sake of that gal up yonder."

"Why?"

Hayes threw him an amused glance. "You are green, ain't you? The mute bein' with us means we're headed for Fuente Grande, a ruined Aztec city that the Mexicans think is accursed. Tlascuco, the Tapoyas call the

place, an' they're livin' inside its walls. Take it from me, Courier, it's a hell on earth—an' no place for that purty gal an' her father. I could tell you a lot about Fuente Grande, but—"

"Go ahead, Hayes."

Color seemed to drain from the man's leathery face. His eyes shuttled through the dust to where Conkling rode beside Mudo. Then he shook his head.

"Waste of breath," he grunted, and put spurs to his horse. The rest of it came floating back to Arch. "You're goin' there, if I don't miss my guess, an' you'll see for yourself."

LOOKING back at that brief talk with Sonora Hayes, as the outfit moved southward, Arch Courier found himself wondering what had prompted the man's loquacious lapse. For, normally, Hayes proved to be a tight-lipped, sullen character who answered only in grunted monosyllables, and then only when spoken to. Aside from Conkling and Hayes, Sparling and his daughter, and Arch, the company was made up of four Mexicans and the Indian, El Mudo, the mute one.

At mealtime, it seemed to be every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost, so Arch volunteered to cook for the scientist and his girl. Netta received the offer coldly, yet not without a certain aloof courtesy.

"Thank you, no," she refused. "That won't be necessary. Whatever we need, I will prepare. We're obliged, but—"

"Your personal dislike of me is unseemly," Arch said stubbornly. "I made you a friendly offer. Now I'll make it an order. I'm doing the cooking for you, and you can eat it or go hungry." He finished laying the wood and set it afire. "When we get wherever you're going, you can do as you like. But while we're traveling, you'll do as I say."

"And if I don't," she retorted, with spirit, "I suppose you'll murder me, like you murdered that man in San Gorgonio?"

"Netta!" her father reproved her, lifting his head from his maps. "That will be enough of that. Courier is in charge and we will obey him in all things reasonable."

The girl tossed her pretty head and retired in good order. She was within a few feet of the brush line when the sharp, querulous voice of a misshapen Mexican boy startled her.

"You are what you call the pretty face but empty head, señorita. You should not talk like that to thees Señor Courier. When he keel Señor Baggs, that ees not murder. He stop Baggs from keeling me, you sabe? Then Baggs, she would keel Courier, except she ees not so fast from the holster. Señor Courier ees good man, that's why I am come to go weeth heem."

The girl had throttled a short scream, when the strange creature started speaking. Silence fell over the camp. Arch rose from the fire, moved toward the boy.

"Who are you?" he asked severely.

"I am Ranito, the tree frog, señor. Ranito Gomez."

"Where'd you come from?"

"San Gorgonio."

"Afoot?"

"Seguremente. Sure. I run like the weend, patron. All day and never feel tired. Two-three days weethout stopping."

Arch looked at his twisted body and skinny legs, and doubted the words. "You say you came to go with me, eh?"

"Si, señor. To be your boy, take care your horse, make your bed at night and cook your food, so she—" he pointed to Netta Sparling—"won't poison you."

"You can't go with me, Ranito," said Arch, trying not to be unkind. "There's no horse for you, and besides—"

"Oh, I don't need a horse, señor. I walk and run. I go very fast, faster than you travel. Seguro. I am one devil of a fellow, Señor Courier. I do everything. I look after you."

"It's plumb out of the question, son. I wouldn't mind having you, but—"

"But I would . . . an' do!" Conkling's heavy voice rasped uncompromisingly from the fire where the Mexicans were already patting out tortillas. "Get outa the camp, kid, you hear me? Clear out. If you run so good, start runnin', before I snake some of the hide off'n you."

THONGED about his thick wrist was a long blacksnake whip, with which he could kill a horsefly on a mule's rump. He flung the lash out, cracking it back with an explosion like a pistol shot. The boy backed away, his eyes hot and dangerous, but not frightened. Indeed, Arch saw something like desperation on that pinched face, and wondered. He whirled, placing himself before Conkling.

"Hold on," he warned. "Go on back where you belong. If you lay that lash to the boy, I'll peel your hide with it."

"That boy ain't clutterin' up this camp," snarled Conkling, dangerously insistent on the point. "Out he goes."

"Who says he does?"

"I do. An' you heard me. Blench said. . . ."

That old spirit of underdog worship was flooding Arch again. The boy, a straight gazing, pitifully friendly little fellow of fourteen or fifteen, was the lad Saul Baggs had been bullying when Arch had interfered, back in town. Arch had already gone to bat for him once and made himself some trouble on account of it. Once was enough. But the mere fact that Conkling wanted the boy ousted, without food and after a day of traveling afoot, impelled Arch to take the opposite side.

"I don't care what Blench thinks or what you say. The boy stays, you hear me? I'll be responsible for him."

Conkling glowered and muttered into his beard. Hate blazed from his small, pig-like eyes, and Arch gave it back to him in kind. Presently, glared down, the head muleteer wheeled and strode back to the other fire.

Ranito moved to Arch's side, to slip his small, thin hand into the man's strong palm. "*Gracias, patron,*" the youngster murmured. "Ranito weel not forget. And you weel not be sorry."

He amazed them all then, by fetching himself a basin of water from the spring and luxuriating in lathery suds until he shone like a polished heel. Then he mixed and patted out tortillas, put potatoes on to boil and prepared bacon and eggs and coffee like a trained cook.

Arch, flashing a triumphant look toward Netta Sparling, surprised an interested and appreciative smile. But his look instantly extinguished it.

Chapter V

FUENTE GRANDE

RANITO, the Tree Frog, proved to be a prize. He was forever seeking ways to make himself useful, without being told. Toward Arch Courier he showed a gratitude and affection that reminded one of a whipped puppy, reacting to a comforting hand. That first night, Arch dug him up a blanket. But toward morning it turned cold and when Arch awoke it was to find the boy in his bed, snuggled up to him for warmth, holding trustingly to his hand.

Such regard did something to this man who had known so little kindness. When the cavalcade passed through the village of Las Tunas, he bought the boy a scrubby pony, rigged it with a junk saddle and *jaquima* and rustled up a pair of too large boots, hung with a rusty pair of enormous Mexican rowels. Ranito wept with joy, and all the rest of that day he rode at the van of the procession, proud as Lucifer.

Matt Conkling appeared to take no notice of these attentions to the unwanted boy, but Arch had the man pegged as one who carried a grudge endlessly. He kept himself ready for the moment when the smouldering coals would burst into flame.

LOST CITY OF DESERT DEATH

Outwardly, at least, things went well. The pace was slower than planned, due to Gamaliel Sparling's insistence on stopping to investigate mounds and ruins at the north edge of the San Luis Desert.

"Zunian," he said cryptically. "Interesting but unconnected with the Nahuatl peoples I am studying." He turned his head up, as if in appeal to the sun. "Why, if the Nahuatlans migrated southeastward, according to legend, did they not leave their signs along the way. Not one link has been discovered."

"Nahuatlans?" asked Arch, thinking of the many ancient ruins he had run across in his wanderings.

"Aztecs to you," said Netta Sparling, with an edge of scorn. "They are the people, you know, who sacrificed weaker men by tearing the beating hearts from their living bodies. Today men do the same thing with guns . . . on the street."

Gamaliel Sparling winced, and Arch drew his lips down to a hard, straight line.

"Simple when you explain it like that, ma'am," he said, and turned away. Ranito fell into step beside him, his boots flopping grotesquely as he exerted himself to match the stride.

"Her tongue," he said tightly, "is like the sting of the vinegarroon. But we men know how to pull that sting after you marry weeth her, eh, *patron?*"

"Marry her?" Arch scowled down at him. "What the hell you talking about, kid? I wouldn't marry that gal if she was the last one on earth."

Ranito shrugged. "There ees no other way, *amigo*, to make her into something as good as she looks. No way but to take her to a *padre* and beat her eef she does not live up to her vows. Remember Ranito tol' you that, *patron.*"

THE first real hardship of the trip came in crossing the San Luis Sink. The cool, fresh breezes of the mesas were gone. The sun beat down like hammer strokes.

Alkali dust rose in clouds to powder their clothes, redden their eyes and sear their lips. Man and beast suffered in silence. It was too hard to voice protest, in such heat.

After a dry camp the first night, they were up in the red dawn with a savage wind kicking up a blinding murk. Flying sand pelted them cruelly, stinging their skin, inflaming their eyes and sifting into every fabric of their apparel. There was no sign of a trail. It would have been so easy for them to wander in some uncharted circle that would lead them, as it had led many another wayfarer on the San Luis Desert, to doom.

But El Mudo, the mute one whose comings and goings to and from their camps but added to his mystery, had placed himself unbidden at the head of the party. He rode with his dark eyes stabbing the pall, his sharp, aquiline nose thrust forward hungrily as if he scented the way. With no word, no sign of the universal discomfort, he led them straight across the sands to a cool, life-giving *tanque* of water. As the crow flies, and with perhaps the same instinct, he crossed the desert in a dust storm, aiming at one small, green spot on the other side—and hitting it.

At Arch's suggestion, they halted there to recoup from the trying experience and to let the hungry animals fill up on the lush water grass in the cienega. Once, during the one-day respite, Arch sought to throw light on his ignorance regarding Sparling's purpose.

"How far south," he said, "are you figgering on traveling, Mister Sparling?"

"Why should you care?" snapped Netta, who lolled in the shade nearby. "You signed on for the trip, didn't you? Not going anywhere, are you? I realize you haven't the same chance to shoot down less gun-handly men here that you enjoyed in San Gorgonio, but after all—"

"Sparling," Arch broke in, "why don't you teach that girl of yours some old-fashioned manners?"

The doctor smiled wanly. "I'm afraid that will take a stronger hand than mine, Courier. Women nowadays talk and act as they see fit, and the devil take those who find fault. As to your question, we are headed for Fuente Grande—Big Fountain. Called by the Aztecs who inhabited it in the sixteenth century, Tlascuco—Place of Big Waters. We are, according to my maps, within thirty miles of the place right now. Believe me, I can feel the spell of it on me, even now. The northermost outpost of the Aztec confederation, it was one of the richest, due to its proximity to the gold workings of the Sierra. And, though it must have paid the weight of its fifteen hundred people to the Moctezumas in gold, its riches could not save it when the Spanish legions came, commanded by the cruel Domingo Castinado. . . ."

He talked on and on, recreating the history and legends of the Aztecs. The men gathered about him, spellbound. Night came and fires were kindled. But no one gave food a thought. All were entranced by the mystery, savagery, splendor of days that were gone. The night was half spent before he ceased talking. And though he was wearied, this wiry little man was caught up in the spell he had woven. He retired, excited and impatient for the morrow.

SHADOWS were growing long the next afternoon when the party had their first glimpse of Fuente Grande. Ahead of them, El Mudo sat his horse at the edge of a steep declivity, his face a bronze mask, his finger leveled toward the center of the small but verdant valley.

Yonder it lay, the flat rays of the sinking sun flashing against its walls, making them look like gold. It gripped them all, that sight. But it fairly shook the little scientist. He got off his horse and stood there looking at it, entranced. And after a while he began to talk, pointing out the buildings of interest.

To the west of Fuente Grande rose a

black mound, or small hill, which looked as if it had been cut in two and half removed to make way for the city. The scarp, so formed, provided the west wall, and it was surmounted by five towers—*fortines*, Sparling called them. Even at that distance, each of the towers showed the wear and tear of the centuries, after being pounded with the round shot of Castinado's ordnance.

Joining this cliff at right angles, were the north and south walls, each with its central gateway giving to the main *avenida*. These walls, ragged and ruined in places where breaches had been torn by the Spaniards, were joined by the east wall, which seemed to be intact. The outer walls were studded with fighting bastions, looking like buttresses. The inside was a hodge-podge of ruins, indistinguishable from so far away. And out of them lifted a curtain of smoke.

"Looks like somebody got here ahead of us," Arch commented. "Too bad, Doctor Sparling, if somebody has beat you to these ruins."

The archeologist looked annoyed. "Many have been here before me," he muttered. "It is the same with all ruins. I can only hope that the trophy hunters and vandals have not been too thorough. And that there will be no other outfit here to excavate while we are on the ground. Have you any idea who that could be down there, Conkling?"

"No, I ain't got no idea," muttered the bearded man.

"He lies!" Ranito's shrill voice lifted accusingly. "He knows who it is, all right. The Tapoyas, the Indios who live in Fuente Grande."

"Shut your face, you little stink lizard!" Conkling's wide mouth twisted and his eyes burned as he launched himself at the boy. "No Spic kid's gonna tell me I'm a liar!"

Arch hurled his horse between them, glaring at the head muleteer. Harsh words flared, hot, biting. And, as had happened twice before, Conkling retreated.

"I'll snake the hide off that nosey little

Spick before I'm done," he muttered savagely.

"No, you won't," countered Arch. Then, to the aroused boy: "How do you know the Tapoyas live at Fuente Grande, Ranito?"

"I have the ears to listen and the eyes to see, *patron*. Ranito knows much that bad men do not want him to know." Nor would he say more, until the cavalcade was under way again, dropping down the narrow, winding trail into the valley. Then, with Arch riding at his stirrup, the boy seemed hungry to unburden.

"Thees place, Fuente Grande, ees bad place, señor. A place of the devil. Many theengs 'appen here that are not told. But Conkling can tell eef he would. And Blench. And Baggs, who you keel when he catch me listening to hees talk."

ARCH caught the boy's fervor and was immediately interested. "What do you mean, Ranito? What do you know?"

"Many theengs, señor. For more than a

year, I listen to the talk of the cruel *diablos* who work for Señor Blench. And always the talk is of Fuente Grande, where my father went with a pack train . . . and never came back. The saying is that he was keeled by the Tapoyas. But I don't know. That ees why I come weeth you, señor. To find out. . . . El Mudo, he ees a Tapoya." His eyes smouldered as they fixed upon Arch's pistol, and his fingers opened and closed spasmodically. "Eef he could talk, I would have tied heem up een the night, dragged heem away and burned the truth about my father from heem. I weel get the truth from one of them, that I promise."

"None of that," warned Arch. "All you'll do is make trouble for the rest of us. You say your father came down here with one of Blench's trains?"

"Si, señor."

"For what? Why would Blench send pack animals to Fuente Grande?"

"For gold, *patron*. Always I hear those *diablos* talking about Tapoya gold."

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"Gold!" Arch stroked his chin. "Humph. These Tapoyas miners?"

"*Quien sabe?* Who knows? But they are very bad, that I do know. Many white man come here and never come back."

"Yet Blench's men come and go, eh?"

"*Si, señor.* I hear them talk. Blench ees friend weeth the Tapoyas. He hauls and sells their gold. But when the tax she ees put on Mexican gold brought across the Border, Blench he buy the old Crown Point Mine, ten miles west of San Gorgonio. What's that got to do weeth eet, señor? Ah-h-h, that ees the best theeng I find out. Blench smuggle een Tapoya gold. Hees men work een the Crown Point and get nothing. Yet many mule loads of gold he ships. You sabe?"

Arch looked at the boy in amazement, and with undisguised admiration. "By god-frey, son, you have uncovered something! Why didn't you report this to the sheriff?"

The boy winked slyly. "Ah-h-h, but first I must find out about my father, *patron*. Maybe I have to settle weeth Blench before the law, no? Maybe eet ees him who keel my father; not the Tapoyas."

Arch's mind raced. "But Doctor Sparling?" he murmured. "And his girl? What about them, Ranito? It don't look like he would steer them to these ruins if he was shipping hot gold out, does it?"

The boy frowned. "That," he muttered, "ees w'at you call got me flabbergast, señor. We 'ave to watch the señorita and her papa, take care of them, no?"

"You said it, kid." Arch's brows drew together. "And while you're watching, you keep close to me, you understand? I'm beginning not to like this so well."

Chapter VI

INSIDE DEAD WALLS

DARKNESS caught them a couple of miles short of their objective, with rough ground in between. Arch Courier

called a halt, ordered camp pitched. Conkling raised his great voice in protest and the Mexican *arrieros* muttered their displeasure. Sonora Hayes stood apart from the rest, smiling grimly at the argument. And Esteban remained behind the mules, taking no part, though he was as eager as any to go on to Fuente Grande, where there was sweet water and protection from the night wind that had already begun to sigh.

Arch was adamant, despite Netta's sarcasm and Gamaliel Sparling's anxiety to reach the ruin. In the end he had his way. Supper over, the men sought their blankets, appearing to sleep. But the flare of fires beyond the walls of the ruined city and the low, persistent throbbing of drums trembled on the night air and sent strange thrills along Arch's spine.

Ranito was shivering when he crawled in with Arch. "The diablos," he hissed, "they dance to the beating of Indio drums. Eet ees the sound my poor padre must have heard when they keeled heem. I theenk something very bad weel happen to us . . . in there, *patron*. I am scared." Courier could feel the youngster trembling.

"You and me both, kid," said Arch. "I reckon I better set a guard. Which may mean you and me. I don't know who else we can trust."

Stepping over to advise the men of his intentions, he found El Mudo and Conkling gone. "Where are they?" he asked Sonora Hayes.

The man grinned crookedly. "Where do you think, feller?"

Arch snorted. "Fuente Grande?"

"Can be," grunted Sonora, and pulled the blanket over his head with an air of finality.

Grim-lipped, Arch moved to the outskirts of the camp and kept watch. After a while, Ranito joined him. Together they stood guard, their senses hammered by the hellish beat of those drums and the faint, whisper-like plaint of voices uplifted in weird minor chants. It was long past midnight when the sounds ceased and quiet came to the

wild spot. After that, Arch fought back his drowsiness and steeled himself for trouble. Dawn would be the time for attack, if it were coming. But when dawn broke and the camp came awake, he felt a little ashamed of his fears—and resentful of the taunting smile of the girl, who seemed to divine the way he had spent the night.

Breakfast was ready when Conkling came riding in, more than a little drunk.

"I figgered the kid was talkin' through his hat," he smirked. "But I found he was right. Dead right. The Tapoyas are livin' at Fuente Grande, sure enough. An' last night they was throwin' a shindig for some god or other. What a party!"

"You mean—" Sparling squinted at him through his thick lenses—"you mean that they are still primitive?"

"I don't sabe that primitive thing, Professor," said the head muleteer. "But they sure do know their pulque an' how to quench a man's thirst. Yes, siree."

FOR all his weariness and distraction of mind, Arch Courier never had been more wary and watchful than when the cavalcade filed up to the ruined north gate of Fuente Grande. His interest was more for the members of his own party than for the imposing ruin and the people who might be inhabiting it. Gamaliel Sparling rode in the lead with his daughter, the joy of a zealot on his gaunt face, a steady stream of excited comment falling from his lips.

"See, Netta. Bas reliefs of Quetzalcoatl—the Fair God and feathered serpent. And there, on the wall, is the head of Huitzilopochtli, their war god. Ah, see the *avenida* stretching before us, circling yonder pile of stone—the *teocalli*, or sacrificial pyramid. Great Scott, this place is amazing! The litter has been cleaned up. Look! The houses have been re-roofed with thatch. Must have been a couple of thousand people here at one time. On our left here, the big ruin is the caciques' palace, flanked by the school, the court and other buildings of govern-

ment. On our right, the ceremonial court of the dance. And yonder, high up on that ramp, the Calmenor or Bee House, with the Great Fountain playing down over steps cut in the solid rock. Where that water cascades into the Bee House is where captives were purified for the sacrifice. Marvelous! Perfectly marvelous!"

His fervor was contagious, yet it affected Conkling and his muleteers none at all. Plainly, it was old stuff to them. Just as plainly, they had been here before, which bore out what Ranito had learned in his eavesdropping.

Unless they camped on the highway splitting the ruins, the dancing ground offered their only hope. It was there, through a low gate breaching a serpent-studded wall, that Arch directed the outfit.

At first glance, the place seemed deserted. But when they began to unload the packs, swart faces began peering about the corners of walls and buildings, wild faces reflecting curiosity but not fear. Women and children were there, but few men, and those white-haired and stooped. Where were the young men of the tribe? That troubled Arch, and he spoke of it to Gamaliel.

The scientist appeared not to hear him. "Gad!" he murmured, pointing to a breach in the outer wall. "Look where some cannon ball of Castinado's force tore through the masonry. Guns and powder dragged overland from Vera Cruz—four hundred years ago! Great Scott, I can almost hear the Spanish war cry '*San Jago*' echoing here, and the answering yells of the defending Aztecs. Like a dream, isn't it, Courier?"

More like grim reality, Arch reflected, glancing again at those peering faces. The spell of it was getting him too. Like ghosts, those faces—ghosts of a war-like people who had built this city centuries ago.

Camp was pitched, and no one had offered to come near them. At Arch's order, Conkling and his men rode out to drag back wood for the fires.

Ranito went to work getting dinner. Never had Arch seen such a change in a youngster. The boy's eyes seemed to have receded far into his head. The lines on his pinched face had deepened, making him look old. His lips were pressed into a hard, tight line. Occasionally, Arch saw him fling a hot, vindictive look in the direction of the peering Indians.

After the meal, Gamaliel Sparling took his camera and sketch book and moved out to examine the ruins. Arch warned him.

"I don't think it's safe for you and your girl to go poking around this village alone and unarmed," he said. "If you like I'll go with you."

Netta, prepared to accompany her father, scoffed. "All you think about is violence, Mister Courier. Father and I have been among primitive people far more savage than these Tapoyas. If there is any trouble, it will be because of that gun you wear, and your impatience to use it. I would feel safer if you took it off and put the temptation to use it behind you."

"I think she's right, Courier," said the doctor. "These Tapoyas may be an Aztec strain. But don't forget, they are a conquered people. That makes a vast difference. Anyway, I have experience in handling natives. You needn't be concerned, Courier."

SCOWLING, troubled Arch watched the pair vanish in the shaded aisle between the cacique's palace and the lesser government buildings. The feeling persisted that trouble lay crouched and waiting somewhere in this ruined city. But no such feeling seemed to imbue Conkling and his men. They knelt around a blanket in the shade of the wall, playing monte.

When Arch looked about for Ranito, he could find the boy nowhere. That added to his worry. The bitter little youngster might so easily be the spark to ignite the powder of disaster. Profoundly disturbed, Arch lay down on his bed and fell into a

sleep troubled by wild, insane dreams.

He awoke in the late hours of the afternoon, with a low muttering in his ears. Rising, he saw a strange parade of men moving along the *avenida* toward the thatched ruins that held the homes of the Tapoyas. They were tall, bronzed men, naked to the waist and grimed as if from some labor in the soil. They carried no arms or tools. But Arch, recalling the waving fields of corn along the creek, remote from the ruin, decided that they had been farming. There were at least two score of them, brawny fellows who scowled darkly as they passed. And, when the living quarters beyond the *teocalli* had swallowed them, silence fell over Fuente Grande, broken only by the roar of waters from the spring, cascading down the stone steps and plunging into the Calmenor, or Bee House.

Shadows grew long. The sun vanished below the rampart of the *fortines*, and gloom, figurative and actual, settled over the ruins. Arch, with frequent glances across the *avenida*, got a fire going. Presently he was relieved to see Netta hurrying toward them.

"Father says to eat supper without him," she announced. "He'd rather pour over a ruin than eat, any time."

"What's he found?" asked Arch.

"Oh, nothing important. Someone has done a lot of work here. We were all born a hundred years too late for this business. Personally, I'll take my digging in the deep jungle, where trophy hunters must chop their way in with machetes. When do we eat?"

Arch got the supper, cleaned up the cups and plates. He was forced to confess that he was worried about Ranito and the doctor. Dusk came, and then night fell. No flare or smoke of cooking fires came from the living quarters beyond the *teocalli*. No sound intruded into the murmur of waters and the croaking of frogs. Netta became more and more restless, finally moving to the gate of the dancing ground and sending out a shrill

call for her father. When no answer came, she showed fear.

"I'm worried about him," she confessed. "He has no light and he should be back by this time."

"Where did you leave him?" Arch rose, smiling a little as he loosened his gun in its sheath.

"Yonder, in the cacique's palace."

"Conkling," said Arch, "come with me. We'll go find Sparling."

The bearded man dragged himself to his feet, grumbling. "Damn foolishness," he muttered. "But let's get it over with."

MATCHING steps, they crossed the *avenida* and entered the stygian gloom of the crumbling palace. Rodents squeaked and scurried before them. But there was nothing else. Their calls failed to bring a response from the scientist.

The conviction gripped Arch that something serious had happened to Gamaliel Sparling. He turned out the sullen muleteers, leaving Sonora Hayes to stay in camp with Netta, and they combed the ruins to no avail. Forcing Conkling against his will, Arch took the man down to the tiered houses, where his shout drew a few women.

Conkling spoke to them in the breathy dialect of the Aztecos. And, after a time, El Mudo, the Mute One, made his appearance.

Conkling's query brought a deep-toned answer from the guide, disproving his inability to speak. After some palaver, El Mudo lifted his voice to summon a half dozen native men. And a search of the great ruins ensued. For hours the darkest crannies of the place echoed to the passage of questing men without result.

It was as if the rocky bench, upon which Fuente Grande was built, had opened up and swallowed Sparling. Arch was at the point of demanding a search of the houses—when a shrill feminine scream sheered through the night.

The sound came from the court of the dance, and it froze Arch in his tracks. He stood with his men, holding his breath and listening for a recurrence of the sound. None came, but the faint echo of guttural grunts snapped the bonds of his inertia.

"It's Netta Sparling!" he bellowed, and broke into a run. "Come on!"

A half hundred strides took him into the *avenida*. He sprinted swiftly along its smooth surface, swerving right through the gate and plunging to a stop in the very



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center of the camp. His gun was in his hand. His breath, coming in gasps, made the only sound.

Into the murmur of the muleteers, hurrying up to join him, he lifted his voice. "Netta!" he bawled. "Netta Sparling! Sonora! Where are you?"

Only echoes came back to mock him. Arch cursed himself bitterly, damning himself for having trusted the girl to a man who patently was party to some unguessed treachery.

Chapter VII

VOICES FROM THE WELL

THERE was nothing to do but renew the search, this time for four missing people. To Arch, that meant an invasion of the living quarters where the Tapoyas made their homes. And also the Tecpan—a large restored building across the square from the Bee House—where, according to Gamaliel Sparling, unattached women were housed, in accordance with some barbaric religious custom of the ancient Aztecs. When Arch voiced the idea and ordered his men to accompany him, Matt Conkling rebelled.

"You can count me out of that," he growled. "Me, I ain't gonna go pokin' around the houses of these Indios. No sir. That's the best way I know to get a shiv between my ribs. If you wanta search them houses, go ahead. It's your funeral."

Arch glared at him, anger boiling furiously in his veins. For an instant, he was tempted to throw down on the man and force a showdown. But second thought held his hand. It could do no good to further antagonize the man. His query brought quick response from the Mexican *arrieros*. They wanted no part of a search through the native quarters, and Arch didn't blame them too much. Dark houses. No adequate means of providing light. One man against an unguessed number of resentful Tapoyas. He might not last a minute, but pride would

not let him admit it. He had to go on. "All right, you rabbits," he snapped at them. "I'll go it alone."

Conkling sneered at him. "What's got into you, Courier? Go sweet on the gal, did you? What's she to you? An' her dad? Blench didn't send us down here to die for a pair of ancient grave diggers. Hell, no! Go on to bed an' le's wait till daylight. I've got an idea Sparling's got lost somewhere in the ruins. An' the gal has been tolled off somewhere's by Sonora. That lanky cowpuncher's quite a man with the ladies."

It lacked the ring of sincerity, and Arch said, "You think Blench would want us to lay down and make no effort to find them, eh?"

Conkling smirked. "We've made plenty effort. If Blench was here right now, he'd say to let it go till daylight. By that time Cuitenoc—El Mudo—will likely have found everybody that's missing. Take it easy, feller. Don't be a noseey fool."

Arch snorted and strode away. A faint light struck through the curtained entrance of the Tecpan, and Arch's hail brought a queenly, olive-skinned woman in a loose flowing gown and with ropes of turquoise around her throat. Her inky hair was held back by a silver band, studded with turquoise. She regarded Arch calmly.

"What do you want?" she asked, in good Spanish. And when Arch had explained: "Men are prohibited in the Tecpan. There is no such girl here."

Arch looked past her, into a narrow stone hallway lighted dimly by some hidden, flickering flare. And far back, only shadowy figures, stood tall, bronzed Amazons, with fixed lances. Shrugging, he turned away. The dingy labyrinths of the houses, rock masonry reaching in tiers toward the south wall parapet, repelled him. Having no knowledge of the layout, he would be putty in their hands, if the Tapoyas were behind these disappearances and were hostile. Never had he felt so helpless and alone as

when he turned back toward the camp, there to face the low, taunting laughter of Conkling and his muleteers.

WEARIED after nearly twenty hours without rest, Arch stretched out on his blankets, but not to sleep. The endless purling of water from the spring into the Bee House ebbed and flowed like voices muttering vague warnings in some outlandish tongue. Arch found himself tightening, listening, striving vainly to make words out of those gurglings that would give him a clue to the whereabouts of Sparling, his daughter, Sonora . . . and Ranito.

Never superstitious, he knew there was some practical explanation to the disappearances, but reason brought him no nearer to an answer. There was a taint to this place, some hidden string attached. He had felt it from the first and he damned himself now for not having taken a stronger stand with Gamaliel Sparling. In a way he had become a partner in the queer, sinister things taking place in Fuente Grande.

Conkling and his men took to their blankets. A half hour passed and Arch felt the first visit of drowsiness. Then he was suddenly wide awake as a faint hiss struck into his consciousness.

He reared to one elbow, his gun in his hand. Something came crawling over the foot of his bed, and then Ranito, the Tree Frog, was lying beside him, pressed close, clinging almost desperately.

"Kid!" whispered Arch, and hugged him. "Wherever from hell did you come from and where have you been?"

The boy breathed heavily, as if he had been running. But presently his respiration quieted and he spoke in a soft whisper. "Thees place she ees *muy malo, amigo. Que diablos*—what devils live here. I 'ave been all around, everywhere. Sometimes they almost find me, but I am like the snake and I wiggle away."

"What have you found?" asked Arch. "See anything of the doctor?"

"Ranito see and he hear," murmured the boy. "But not enough. I hear the señorita scream. I run very fast but I do not see her. But I see Sonora, weeth four Indios holding heem. He fight very hard but they take heem away. Ranito follow but lose heem. Then I come to the well, where the *mujeres* get water. And w'at you think, my friend? I hear voices coming up out of that well. *Es verdad.*"

"Voices?"

"*Si, señor.* Men talking."

Arch's heart sank. "What you probably heard," he reflected, "was Gamaliel Sparling hollering for help. Those devils have thrown him down the well. Come on! Take me there."

TOGETHER they rose and slid out the gate. Conkling and his men seemed asleep, for they gave no sign as the pair passed them. Set alongside the stone coping to the village well, over which a winch had been set, with pulley, rope and twin buckets, the man and the boy paused, listening. From below came the gurgle of water, nothing more. Arch thumbnailed a match, cupped it to throw the beam downward. Far below, the light was reflected back at him. No man held to the sides; no ruffled surface. Arch groaned.

"Too late, Ranito. There's nothing. Likely Sparling clung here until he was chilled, then gave up and sank. Too bad . . . for that poor girl."

"But there were voices," insisted the boy. "Much talk. Maybe they threw her down the well, no?"

It seemed very close to probability, and Arch didn't answer. He turned dejectedly away, Ranito tagging along beside him. Wordlessly, they crossed the *avenida*, followed the wall toward the gate that gave to the camp.

It happened then. Silent as the tread of ghosts, a dozen bare feet hit the top of the wall. Ranito cried out, caught at Arch as he swerved. Nearly naked figures came sailing

down to swarm all over them. And Arch was fighting as he had never fought before. He drove his fist into a contorted coppery face and a screaming Tapoya was under foot. Two more seized him, bore him backward. He dropped one, groaning, with a lifted knee in the groin, hammered the other with rights and lefts in a futile effort to shake his grip.

Somewhere he could hear Ranito, screaming, cursing, his thin, angry voice seeming to grow fainter as if he were being carried away. A leaping figure landed atop Arch and bore him to his knees. Then all at once he was buried under their weight, crushed to earth. Exerting the last of his strength, he reared up, carrying them with him. Through the welter of struggling bodies, he had one fleeting glimpse of the well, and something happening there that unleashed all the devils in him.

Three racing Tapoyas, holding Ranito aloft between them, swerved to the well, held the struggling, screaming boy over the shaft and dropped him. Arch knew then what the fate of Gamaliel Sparling had been, and probably Netta and Sonora too.

It drove him berserk. He slugged and bit and kicked, twisting savagely to shake off his attackers. Like leeches, they clung to his arms and legs, rolling with him. Powerful fingers sank into his throat. Bruising blows shocked him. His lungs, cut off from their air supply, swelled as if to burst. His senses flickered and red spots danced before his eyes. A club caromed off his skull. Strength poured out of him and everything went black. His struggles ceased and he knew no more.

Chapter VIII

THE HIGH CACIQUE

AFTER Gamaliel Sparling had sent Netta back to camp for supper, he spent some little time examining the stone dais, with its coping of carved winged serpents, where

the throne of the High Cacique had once stood. The throne had been removed, probably by some previous archeological expedition. The doctor finally straightened his pinched face reflecting discouragement. All the signs here pointed to a complete gutting of the treasures of Fuente Grande probably many years ago.

The light was failing and Sparling moved into one of the adjoining rooms, behind the dais. The place was dusty, littered with rocks fallen from the top of the walls. Hideously grinning heads of Huitzilopochtli leered at him from the four corners, their hollow eye sockets revealing the marks of the vandals who had removed the turquoise eyes. Under such debris as this, thought the scientist, was his only hope of finding the golden urns used in their mythological ceremonies. He turned to rummage about in the litter, then froze as a footfall echoed faintly behind him. He whirled.

In the opening through which he had just passed, stood a giant, bronzed Indian, naked save for a cloth, holding a long lance tipped with obsidian.

In Azteco, the man said, "What you look for? What you want?"

Something in the native's stern manner made the scientist nervous. But, having had long experience in this business, he felt no fear. He held out the little golden urn he was carrying. "These," he answered struggling with the dialect. "You know where I can find another like this one?"

The Indian advanced to look at the piece. He grunted, then lifted his voice. "Take this man to the cacique. If he wills it show him where to get the golden cups."

Again Gamaliel Sparling turned. In an entryway, at the far end of the room, three more of the natives stood like statues. They had come without sound, and in the heavy down-drawing of their brows was a hint of menace. Schooled never to antagonize the primitive peoples with whom he came in contact, Sparling answered the jerk of the bronzed head and fell in between them.

They led him out of the ancient palace of the caciques and into the paved courtyard of the *calmecac*, where the disintegrating bulk of the school hid them from the camp across the *avenida*. Up a wide stone staircase they took him and behind the Calmenor, or Bee House.

Here Sparling halted, touched suddenly with doubt. One of his guides pushed him, uttering a breathy order. Then holding to his arms, they walked him down a short ramp, over which the waters from the great spring tumbled, and into the entrance of the Bee House, where the water spilled in a broad fan, dropping ten feet and vanishing through a hole in the floor. Allowing him no more than enough time to note that the place was empty, that a long, narrow aperture gave out toward the *teocalli*, or sacrificial pyramid in the square, they pushed him through the curtain of the falls. Here, from a moist platform, steps descended into the blackness.

With a firm hold on him, they descended with confidence. Seventy-nine steps—Sparling counted them. They turned then, took him over a bridge, below which a strong stream rushed, then along a narrow walk. Somewhere ahead, like an eye in the stygian gloom, a light shone. In its faint glow the scientist could make out the rough rock vault overhead. Off to the left, a faint sheen came from a subterranean body of water. All this, he knew, was underneath Fuente Grande.

One of his guides called out. An answer came from a cubicle, through the doorway of which light struck past the edge of a hanging curtain. The air was heavy and damp, redolent with a pungency that reminded Sparling of Arabian hashish.

The curtain was drawn back and Sparling shoved inside.

THE scientist came to a stop, his breath drawn outward by a scene of barbaric splendor. The room, twenty by forty, had been hewn from solid rock. The walls were hung with golden plaques, inscribed with Aztec hieroglyphics. From each corner grinned the faces of the ugly war gods. At the far end, on a dais, stood the handsomely carved throne of the caciques. On that throne, beside a naked, lance bearing warrior, sat the cacique. And it was for him that the scientist had eyes, and for him alone.

For that gorgeous figure, sitting there like a king, was Killian Blench. No doubt of it. He had the same gaunt, high-boned face, the same luminous, black eyes and wrinkled, leathery skin. Strangely, in his *tilmantli*, or feathered cloak, his golden soled sandals and his girdle set with green *chalcchivill*, so dear to the followers of Moctezuma, he looked like an Indian. And his *panache*, or headdress of colored plumes, gave him the true look of a savage ruler.

"You?" It seemed all Gamaliel Sparling could say.



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Blench laughed, as the true Aztec never does. "Yes, me," he conceded. "Surprised to see me here, eh, Sparling? I left San Gorgonia two days after you did and reached here a day before you. Sit down." He pointed to the stone bench before the dais, and the doctor sat.

"What is the meaning of this, Blench?" he asked.

"It means," said Blench, "that I saw to it that you received the golden urn you brought here, hoping it would bring you here. I'll be very frank, Sparling—I need you desperately."

"Need me?"

"For reasons that don't matter, I can no longer ship gold across the Border profitably. So I smuggled it across and made it appear that it came from my barren Crown Point Mine. But there is now a State Mine Inspector who will soon make a survey of that property. I am forced to find another way. So I conceived the idea of turning Fuente Grande gold into ancient Aztec utensils. I had a few made and found ready sale for them. They brought anywhere from five hundred to a thousand dollars for a hundred dollars worth of gold. Nice business."

"You mean that gold cup is spurious, Blench?"

"A fake, I call it."

"But the hieroglyphics?"

"Put on there by an old Aztec who has studied the ancient higher class of hieroglyphs all his life. Clever engraver, he was, but too stubborn for his own good. Yes, and without the proper will to live. When he died, I tried other Tapoyas. But all they could do was copy the models I already had. Too many cups with the same inscriptions would not do. That's why I sent for you."

"Me?"

"Yes. You see, I learned all about you, Doctor. No living man knows as much of the Aztec culture as you. No man is better prepared to finish these cups for my trade. With your cooperation, I can transport as

many ancient artifacts, as much gold, as you can prepare for me. You understand?"

Gamaliel Sparling drew himself up, quivering with rage. "Sir," he said, with great formality, "you've made a mistake in your man. I will have no part of this fraud." He turned toward the curtained door, where his three guides waited with imperturbable patience. "How do I get out of this place?"

"You don't, Sparling."

THE little scientist whirled to face Blench. "What? How's that?"

"You heard me. You never will leave this place again, Sparling. From this day on, as long as you live, you will remain at your work bench, not far from here, and carve ancient messages, ancient lessons, ancient history—on ancient golden cups."

He was laughing. Sparling stood frozen, very pale. The laughter died away and the archeologist gulped. "I am in your power, it would seem," he said sadly. "But no force on earth or in heaven can make me a party to this swindle, Blench. You may hold me a prisoner, but I will die before I do your bidding."

"But what about your daughter?" asked Blench, smirking. "She is so young, so beautiful. Her life is all before her."

"What—what do you mean?"

Blench went brittle. "If you don't be a good little boy, Sparling, I shall turn your daughter over to the Tapoyas . . . to be sacrificed on the *teocalli*."

Sparling was scornful of the threat. "You can't bluff me, Blench. These mean folk have no illusions of grandeur, no habits or traditions of their ancestors before the conquest."

"They had none, Sparling," Blench said pityingly, "until they met me. Through my study of the old Aztecs, I have imbued them with new hope. I have schooled them in the glories of the eighth cycle of Aztec existence. I have made them see that the intervening centuries of slavery and oppression can be conveniently lumped into the

ninth cycle, and forgotten. This, my friend, is the beginning of the tenth cycle, during which the Aztec shall reestablish his glory."

"Twaddle!" snorted the doctor.

"Sure it is," grinned Blench. "But it will take a good man to convince them of the fact. They believe it, Sparling. The one you knew as El Mudo, who guided you here, is really Cuitemoc the Great. He believes he is a direct descendant of Moctezuma. He is the high priest of Quetzalcoatl. Another, Cactitlan, thinks he descended from a long line of Aztec lords. He is the priest of Huitzilopochtli, the war god. Those two work together, with none of the jealousies of the eighth cycle, Sparling. And they work for me—their grand cacique. The Tapoyas operate the rich mine that honeycombs this mountain, believing the gold is being treasured against the glorious rise of a dead race. When they learn the truth, it will be too late. I will be gone from their lives, and I will be rich."

"You dog," muttered the doctor. Then, as a low moan shuddered through the doorway: "What—what was that?"

"The bad dream," said Blench, "of one who could not see things my way. What about your daughter?"

"If you try to touch her," gritted Sparling, "Courier will fill you with lead."

Again Blench laughed. "I already have her, my friend. And this Courier, who forgets where his bread is buttered, is already doomed. Do you go to work for me, or do I turn your Netta over to the Tapoya priests?"

The scientist dropped his eyes, shaking his head dazedly. Blench stood up, his eyes flaming. "Take him to the bench," he ordered. "Chain him there. If you make up your mind before tomorrow noon, Sparling, send me word. After that you will have a grandstand seat at the spectacle."

WHEN the warriors had taken the scientist away, Blench sat down again, dropping his angular jaw into his palm and

staring away into nothingness for a long time. His eyes glowed like coals fanned by the breeze. The torches flickered, slowly burning down.

Outside, on the narrow walkway paralleling the stream, confusion sent its murmurs into the room, but Blench seemed not to hear. Later it happened again. This time it aroused him. He drew himself to his great height, caught up a torch and stepped around the curtain. Tapoyas were passing, carrying the limp burden of a man. Killian Blench smiled thinly as he followed.

Now he paused to look, cold-eyed, upon a scene that might have been transplanted from hell. A line of circular *arrastres*, grinding mills, stretched away to the edge of torchlight. There were four of them. The great rock wheels were silent now, but chained to the beams through which they were powered, were sleeping men—a dozen to each *arrastre*. The Indios were clamping steel bracelets onto the wrists of their moaning, writhing victim—cuffs attached to a five-foot length of heavy chain. A lock came off the hasp connecting the split, hinged beam; the halves were parted and the chain fixed in a slot between them. Then the device was locked again.

Thin, bearded and pinch-faced men in tatters twisted and moaned in the sleep of utter exhaustion. Blench laughed and moved close to the one they had just locked in. The man was emerging from unconsciousness. Blench booted him.

"Wake up, Courier! Snap out of it! Get up on your knees and show proper respect for your betters."

Arch opened his eyes. A grotesque shadow, like something out of a bad dream, took shape before him—and presently materialized into Killian Blench, garbed like a savage.

"You!" he muttered, his brain still reeling under the shock of the blows that had overcome him. "I might have known you had something to do with this hellish business."

"Something?" Again Blench uttered that dry, mirthless laugh. "I have everything to do with it, Courier. Just as I am San Gorgonio, I am Tlascuco, or Fuente Grande, as you know it. I am the chief and you are a slave. Wake up! Come out of it! Look at your wrists. See where the chains go? Well, you'll have plenty of time to figure a way to work out of that. When you do—"

"I—I'll kill you," promised Arch, fighting against nausea.

"When you do," grinned Blench, "you'll be treading on your beard. Sleep well, fellow, for they'll be kicking you back to life in a few hours, making you wish you had never left Yuma Prison."

He turned away, moving straight and proud along the line of sleepers. At the end of the line, on the next *arrastre*, one of the prone men seemed suddenly to erupt. His legs came up, doubled and straightened, his feet catching Blench in the side and knocking him across the walk and into the rushing stream with a splash. He emerged dripping, his plumes no longer brave. His face was a black cloud in the torchlight.

"Beat him!" he ordered, and the guards leaped to their task.

"Do your own dirty work, you ugly coyote!" It was the raging voice of Sonora Hayes. "Give me a chance at you, Blench. I'll kick out that stinkin' chunk uh carrion you call a heart. . . . Ugh!"

Heavy braided-leather lashes bit into him, swung by brawny arms. They drove the breath from him. He tried to curse them, but they smashed the words back, beat him to a flat, unmoving shadow that seemed to merge with the rock. Arch, already sick, hid his eyes from the sight. He heard the guards wash their blood-stained whips in the stream and leave with the torches.

Inky blackness fell. The silence was broken only by the hiss of rushing water and the breathing of awakened and desperate men. Shock of the punishment, both physical and mental, the unanswerable mys-

tery of something like a bad nightmare, the downbearing sense of doom, all these things combined to rob Arch of his senses again. He collapsed and lay still.

Chapter IX

OUT OF THE LIVING GRAVE

ARCH woke with someone kicking him, railing at him in the gaspy dialect of the Aztecos. He stirred, came to his hunkers to stare about him. Torches, stuck into holes in the rock, guttered in some fitful draft, throwing weird shadows on the shrunken cheeks of his chained mates. Their eyes, hungry and burning, were all turned along the walk, whence came men bearing steaming pots, one for each pair.

It proved to be *atole de maiz*, a sort of cornmeal mush, and the famished men attacked it with their hands, growling like beasts, cramming it between their bearded lips, slavering like starving wolves. Arch didn't offer to touch the stuff. He wasn't hungry and the sight of it made him sick.

During the feeding, long files of Tapoyas filed along the walk by twos, silent and emotionless, to draw away in the distance. Following their movements, Arch could see the flare of their torches reflected outward onto what seemed to be the surface of a lake. Minutes later, the torches vanished, though the faint suggestion of their far-away light remained.

Soon the musty air of the underground chamber shuddered with heavy concussions, and the echoes of blasts pounded Arch's ear drums. A mine! That was it. He was chained in a mine. Somewhere Blench was blasting out ore, exactly as Ranito had said. The poor little Tree Frog had been close to the truth when he had died.

The echoes of the explosions died away. Water was fetched to the men who had finished their meal, then the utensils were taken away. The whip-wielders took their positions, eight of them—one for each half

bar, at each *arrastre*. A gruff order was given and the slaves scrambled to their feet, Arch among them. Across the torchlit interval, Arch saw Sonora looking at him with dreadfully bitter eyes. The man was a mess, his eyes black, his face cut, bloody from head to foot. Resentment burned in his glance. He was not licked yet. But, from the looks of the others, he would be.

The patter of *guaraches* sounded on the rock walk. A long line of men came out of the gloom, heavy baskets on their shoulders. Their burdens, shattered rock shot and cross-shot with golden stringers, were dumped into the rude stone mills. Eight cruel voices barked an order and the men lent their weight to the beams. The massive stone wheels turned, crushing the ore. Pitifully weakened workers strained their thighs to keep it going. And when one slipped or faltered, the lash fell across his bare, scarred back.

Soon all four *arrastres* were working. And when the ore had been powdered, there were more Indios to shovel it into baskets and carry it up to the Bee House, where it was dumped into the flood, to be stirred in the ingenious stone riffles—the heavy gold to settle, the lighter muck to be carried down the hissing stream. There was an aboriginal efficiency to this ant hill of industry, Arch admitted grudgingly as he gave his strength to the chore. And he did his part. He had no desire for treatment such as Sonora had received the night before.

Like clockwork, the labor went on. At noon, there were fresh bowls of *atole*, and this time Arch ate of the sticky, unsalted mess. A man had to keep up his strength if he hoped. . . . But dared a man hope—for anything?

By now, Arch's eyes were becoming fully accustomed to the gloom. That lake out yonder, giving back the flares of the torches, intrigued him. That was the water he had seen when he and Ranito had looked down the well. In fact, he could see the patch

of light, far out, where indirect sunlight struck down.

He was straining along, about mid-afternoon, thinking of Ranito, in the hope of taking his mind off his growing weariness and fatigue, when he saw the slave driver of his unit walk down to the lake's edge and kneel for a drink. It was luck, just plain luck, that kept him from missing that slight disturbance on the water, the club that rose and fell, then the sudden drawing of the guard's body off the ledge. That was all. Arch didn't understand it, but it left him with a swiftly beating heart.

THE disappearance of the guard created a furor. An excited search was made. Now it was the turn of the Tapoyas to speculate upon the mystery of men vanishing. After a welcome respite for the exhausted men chained to the beams, another whip man was substituted and the work went on. But the agitated talking of the Indians betrayed their bewilderment.

The miners came stringing back, each to dump his load and leave for his home. The powdered ore was gathered, sent over the riffles. Not until then did the mills stop turning. The workers sank in their tracks, lying like dead men. Supper came, the same unpalatable stuff. Then the torches were taken away and silence came to the underground prison.

For a long time Arch lay where he had dropped, shutting his mind to his aches and pains. He dozed, awakening with the feeling that something stalked him. He squirmed to his knees. His chains rattled. Something hissed in the inky blackness.

"Ss-s-s! Señor Courier!"

"What's that?" Sonora's voice struck across the interval.

"It's Ranito," whispered Arch. "Keep quiet. 'Come here to me, *muchacho*.'"

Relief and hope burned in Arch, and he ached to lay his hands on the little fellow who had somehow miraculously escaped death. But the boy crept past, hissing

again. Arch heard him murmur: "Papa! Papa Gomez!"

"*Dios! Ranito!* Again I dream. It cannot be so." Chains rattled and there was the choking sound of a man weeping.

Silence held the others, and the sense of listening was a force in the blackness. Whisperings ran between Ranito and his sire, and then the boy had left his long-lost father and was beside Arch, clinging to him.

"Señor Courier," he whispered, "the Tapoyas are gathering in the plaza. From their talk, there weel be a *sacrificio*."

"Sacrifice?" Arch shuddered. "Who?"

"The Señorita Netta. She is to be killed."

"God!" Arch jerked at his chains. "I've got to get out of here, kid. See if you can find something that will bust that lock. A hammer, a bar, anything!"

"I have been down to where they mine," murmured the boy. "I breeng back an iron drill. Maybe—"

"Where is it? Get it here—quick."

Ranito found the steel bar and Arch wedged it behind the hasp. Then, with the boy putting his whole weight against it, and with Arch bracing against the lever with his foot, they wrenched off the lock. The other prisoners, suddenly revived by the hope of escape, were on their feet, muttering. It took but a minute to part the beams and release them. After that, there were seven more locks to remove. Then there were nearly half a hundred scarecrows, chains looped from their wrists, gathered about him in the darkness. Americans, Mexicans, a Chinaman, two Negroes and a German who could only mutter, "*Donnerwetter . . . mein Gott! Donnerwetter . . . mein Gott!*" over and over again.

"Now listen," Arch told them. "Form by threes, with your chain held in your right hand, your left holding to the man ahead. Ranito will lead us out of here. Then it will be your chains against their guns and spears. The advantage of surprise will be ours and, if God wills it so, we will escape

from this devil's den. Lead out, kid." Arch's lips tightened as the file began to move.

THANKFUL that he had won this boy's loyal friendship, Arch took Ranito's hand. The strange rag-tag army of abandoned men moved ahead, with a muted clanking of chains. Up the stairs at the side of the cascade they moved.

At the top, Ranito spoke into Arch's ear. "I weel take a look, *patron*. One minute."

He slipped away, and the falls seemed to swallow him. A moment later he was back. "The Señor Sparling ees in the Bee House, señor. Three Tapoyas are holding heem. All four are at the weendow, looking out."

Here was the first test, and Arch took no time to weigh it. Sacrifice! One minute might spell the difference between life and death for Netta. He passed the order back. Then, with Ranito leading the way, with Sonora Hayes on his left and Edmundo Gomez, the boy's father, at his right, he led them up the steps under the falls and so to the floor of the Bee House. The chains were silent now, but ready—powerful weapons in the hands of determined men.

In the Calmenor, a faint light struck through the long, flat window. Four figures were silhouetted against that light. Past those shadows, Arch could see the top of the sacrificial pyramid as he peered around the sheet of water. The voice of the Fuente Grande shut out noises from the village, likewise hid Arch's gasp—at the sight that met his gaze.

On the *teocalli* stood the rounded sacrificial rock. Beside it, stood two tall priests, one on either side of an ugly, grinning figure of Huitzilopochtli. They were attired in flowing, feathered gowns, with headdresses of colored plumes swaying in the night breeze. Lights from many torches or great fires—Arch couldn't see which—made them look like statues. But the thing that brought the gasp from Arch was Netta. She came

into his view, climbing the staircase, and never had Arch seen anything so beautiful.

She was dressed in a feather gown, caught in at the waist with a jeweled sash. About her brow was a silver band from which rose a crown of feathers, so dear to Aztec ceremonies. Behind her strode Killian Blench, tall, stern and cruel, dressed as Arch had seen him the night before.

Ranito had moved aside, crouching. Arch nudged the pair beside him. Together, the three of them leaped, their chains clubbed. The Tapoya guards must have sensed their doom, for they spun about. Three chains swung and the Indios went down without a groan, their skulls crushed. The little scientist, pale and drawn as a ghost, shrank back against the front wall, staring. Then he was sobbing.

"Courier! I thought you were—" And then, as the bearded, desperate men came filing up to fill the place: "Great God, what does this mean?"

"Listen," snapped Arch, and turned to the window.

A great roar had risen from the throng massed about the foot of the *teocalli*, a roar that cut off with amazing suddenness. Netta Sparling had been lain across the convex sacrificial stone, her breast bared. Blench stood over her, a gleaming obsidian knife in his upraised hand.

INTO the hush, Blench's voice boomed across to the Calmenor, at which he stared "Gamaliel Sparling! This is your last chance. Give me your word that you will do as I ask and I will declare a sign of mercy from Quetzalcoatl. Refuse and you will see this girl sacrificed to our gods. Speak!"

"He won't do it," groaned the doctor. "He can't. No white man would."

"If you think he's a white man, you're crazy," barked Arch Courier. "Tell him you'll do whatever it is he wants."

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Chapter X

WILL OF THE GODS

"But you don't know what he's—"
 "Tell him, you hear me? You want to see that poor girl ripped open and her heart dragged out? Tell him yes, or I'll club you with this chain and tell him for you."

Gamaliel Sparling sent his voice rolling out: "Yes! Yes! Yes!" Weak at first, it rose to a scream of desperation.

In answer, Blench lifted both hands high, hurling the knife away. Words poured in a roar from his throat, in the Aztec tongue: "Tzins! My landholders, did you not hear Quetzalcoatl speak? He says it must not be a woman, that this one must be returned to the tecpan. But tomorrow night there will be another for the sacrifice—the one captured with this girl."

"Meanin' me," grunted Sonora Hayes. "He can have me, if I get just one swing at him with this." He made a savage downstroke with his gripped chain. The look of a barbarian was on his face.

Arch hadn't moved. He heard the great roar drown out Blench, saw the man take Netta in his arms and move down the great staircase with her. It wakened him to action.

"Sonora!" he rapped. "Lead the men in a charge on those devils massed around the pyramid. They don't seem to be armed. They won't be expecting you. I'll try to head off Blench and get Netta. I hope to God I can do it!"

"After the way she treated you?" said Sonora.

"To see if she won't treat me like that some more," answered Arch, and he meant it.

He ducked out the entrance of the Calmenor and went leaping down the staircase toward the fires that burned in the courtyards of the *teocalli*. Behind him came a wild, crazed army of embittered, vengeful men. Only Sparling remained in the Bee House, weak and shaken. For Ranito had ducked in under the waterfall, to lose himself in the black silence beneath the ruins of Fuente Grande.

ARCH sped to the courtyard of the Bee House, sprinted past the well and swerved onto the *avenida* before a Tapoya at the edge of the crowd spotted him and raised an alarm. Instantly there was a wild uproar, and a quick surge toward him. Then, noting the swift charge of fifty hot-eyed, cadaverous demons, the Indios became frightened and began to draw back.

The chained avengers closed with them, driving them like cattle, swinging their chains and slashing down the laggards. Doomed by the crush behind them, those in the van screamed their terror and died. Somewhere a gun cracked. One of that abandoned legion fell, writhing.

Suddenly Conkling and his men materialized in the crowd, their guns spitting, the echoes washing away in the turmoil. But they too were caught in the tide of stampeding Tapoyas, their aim distracted, jostled. They were ridden over or forced back to the pyramid.

Arch sensed rather than saw this contact of unequal forces. He was running as he had never run before, swerving always to the right as he circled the octagon, serpent-studded wall of the pyramid court. Tapoyas were hurtling that wall, in flight. Arch ignored them as he searched for Blench and the girl. He spotted the man carrying Netta to the door of the Tecpan, where the female priestesses held forth, and called his name. Blench half turned, took one fleeting look and ducked inside. Arch raced after him.

Two priestesses were rearing a wooden panel as Arch reached the entrance. He hit it, shoulder on, felled it atop the pair. He pounded into the dingy interior of a long hall, redolent with pungent incense that cloyed the senses. Ahead of him, he saw Blench swerve right and vanish. Then there were two Amazons before him, barring

his way with lances. Arch howled like a demon, saw them falter and give back. Then he had smashed their lances to kindling wood with one fierce down-swipe of his chain, and was on the hunt again, following Blench.

It was a confusing maze of rooms and halls, twisting and winding, that Arch found himself in. Frightened women darted hither and thither before him. At last, winded and wearied from his long run, he paused, hopelessly lost. It was the scream of Netta Sparling, returning to consciousness, that put him back on the lost trail. It issued from a curtained doorway, and toward it Arch leaped, his eyes blazing, his breath rasping harshly.

He skidded to a pause in a smoky, poorly lighted room—a shrine to Quetzalcoatl, god of agriculture, arts and government. At the altar, where torches burned and where the stone image of the white god stood, Killian Blench posed, holding Netta before him. His hand was lifting past her, and in it was a cocked revolver. The girl's eyes, shocked and fearful, widened at sight of the intruder. She displayed no scorn of violence now, no haughty contempt for a man who was forced to kill. Only stark, ravening fear . . . for him.

"Look out, Arch!" she screamed. "He—he's going to shoot. Look out! Oh, my God!"

You can't dodge a bullet; Arch had often said that. Nor did he try now. His best chance lay in attack, not retreat. So he charged, stiffening himself for the agony of a bullet.

With rare presence of mind, Netta wrenched her arm free, brought it up under Blench's gun as it spat fire. The slug went yards high. Blench was cursing, struggling with the girl, when Arch's swung chain took him alongside the head. It crushed his skull like an egg shell. He groaned heavily, relaxed his hold and fell. Then Netta was seeking Arch's arms, chains or no chains, and she was sobbing.

"THANK God you came!" she murmured, her face pressed against his breast. "I prayed that you would, so I'd have one chance to tell you how wrong I was. One chance . . . to hope you wouldn't hate me."

"I've prayed too," he confessed, burying his face in her hair, "that I'd have the chance to explain that it wasn't what you said, Netta. I knew that was just an act. It was what you were . . . behind those words. God forgive me for loving you."

For a moment they stood there, clinging to each other. Then the echoes of the outside conflict struck in to them.

"What's that?" asked Netta.

"It's the finish," Arch said bleakly, and put her from him. "Finish maybe for all of us. I belong out there, Netta."

"Take me with you," she begged. "I don't want to leave you . . . ever."

He knew she meant it. Here was the real Netta Sparling talking, the girl who had faced privation, heat, reptiles, jungles and savages with her father. Arch smiled, picked up Blench's gun and handed it to her.

"I know you don't believe in using one of these," he said. "But let your conscience be your guide. Come on."

He led the way outside at a run, Netta following close. Just outside the Tecpan doorway they paused, staring. Advancing like a phalanx of doom, spread in an ever-closing half moon, those men who had felt the hard hand of Blench's tenth cycle of Aztec glory, swung their chains, driving the screaming Tapoyas high onto the *teocalli*, smashing down those who could not escape because of the crush. Sonora and Edmundo Gomez were in the van, howling their fellows on. The German strode irresistably ahead, roaring, "Donnerwetter, you swine! Mein Gott!" Those leaders were within fifty feet of the base of the pyramid when it happened.

The earth was shaken suddenly, as if by a giant hand. The *teocalli* lurched, settled

to one side and seemed to hang there for one long breath. Then the rock base on which Fuente Grande was built opened in a giant crack and the pyramid, a heavy mass of stone, vanished from sight, carrying its human cargo screaming into the bowels of the earth. One moment the sacrificial pile was standing there, a monument to savage fanaticism, lighted by the beams of the leaping fires. The next it was gone, only a gaping hole remaining. And a terrible silence gripped the ruins.

The surviving Tapoyas regarded the catastrophe, which to them must have seemed like some punishing visitation of the gods. Blench had taught them to revere. Then they were slinking away into the gloom. The chained warriors, no less awed, stood at the brink of that yawning hole, staring down with horror and a sudden consciousness of their spent powers. Arch Courier ran toward them, his voice shrill as he warned them back from a brink that might let go at any second.

Moments later, when they had retreated to a point of safety, Arch stood with his arm about Netta. Gamaliel Sparling, having descended from the Calmenor, clung to them both as if fearful of losing them again.

THE END



"That, my children," he said fervently, "was the will of God Himself."

"God and me," came an answer, in a boyish treble, and Ranito materialized to slip one hand into Arch's, the other into the palm of the girl. "Ranito find their *dinamita*. I lay a long fuse, feex a cap as my papa learn me long time ago, and . . . poof . . . up she go. Si, El Señor Dios and Ranito Gomez, we do a good job, no? And now, *patron*, we beat hell out of any señorita who don't like the way we fight, eh?"

"You tell 'em, kid," beamed Arch, and dared to meet Netta's eyes.

"You do that," she said grimly, and once again there was no doubt that she meant it. "But in the meantime, let's get out of this accursed place."

"Having learned the lesson," added Gamaliel Sparling, grimacing, "that Mister Barnum was right. There's one born every minute. I've wasted good time here, time I could have put to good use in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. But it's an ill wind that blows no one good. At least we've got Courier to take to Africa with us. A good idea, Netta?"

To her, it sounded like a very good idea. The best.

A LIFE FOR PADRE JULIAN

By JACK BLOODHART

RAIN, slashing down endlessly out of an inky sky, had swollen the ordinarily docile river into a swiftly surging torrent. Only a fool or a madman would have plunged into its swirling, suck-

ing currents tonight. Or one to whom the raging river offered a chance to live. . .

The beast staggered suddenly, and Johnny cursed.



A padre took Outlaw Dallas from a raging, watery Boothill, with an offer of friendship and sanctuary from the law. In his turn, would Dallas, who damned all mankind, risk his life to save the badgemen who were hounding him to hell?

At the river's crumbling bank, Johnny Dallas pulled up short. He slanted forward in the saddle and stared at the black water. His horse, winded and blowing, trembled beneath him.

Johnny Dallas straightened up finally and twisted around for a last look along his back-trail. He saw nothing. Rain and darkness shut out the world like a black curtain dropped before his eyes. He did not need to see. He knew who was behind him, because he carried their lead in his body now as an ever-present reminder. Johnny Dallas cursed soundlessly and turned again to face the river.

His harshly chiseled, rain-streaked face was set in grim lines, and every muscle in his pain-wracked, empty-bellied body was taut.

"God help you, ol' hoss," he said aloud, "but you're goin' in there!" and he raked the wet beast with the rowels. The pony plunged down the slippery, muddy river bank, but at the very water's edge he balked and reared back sharply, refusing to go on.

"Sorry, hoss," Johnny Dallas said, and roweled him again. The horse hesitated, danced a little, then plunged into the raging stream.

The smash of the roaring water was like the blow of a giant fist. It tossed the pony like a chip, but the beast struck out, swimming strongly, pitting its great-hearted strength against darkness and storm and the rush of angry water.

Johnny Dallas rolled off the saddle against the current. For an instant wild terror surged through him, and he thought he was lost. The river was gigantic in its strength, it seemed to laugh sardonically at this attempt of living things to breast it. Then, as if by a miracle, Johnny Dallas was forced up against the broad side of his swimming horse and, gasping, fought for and found the beast's tail. Hanging there, while pain burned through his wounded shoulder, he swam as best he could.

THEY swept downstream, while the river's fingers clutched at them, and dangerously careening debris rifled past on the foaming water. The darkness was complete. Water filled the outlaw's eyes and ears and mouth, but nothing short of death itself would ever make him loose his hold on the horse's tail.

Wild thoughts tumbled through Johnny's mind as he shouted and cursed encouragement to his horse. The animal, fatigued before it was ever forced into the river, tired faster now; and fear began to burn a hole in Johnny's mind.

The water was cold, numbing. The ache in his arms was almost unendurable. Pain from the bullet in his shoulder was a fierce, unyielding thing, driving coherence from his mind.

"Go on," he muttered. "Go on. God Almighty! Go on..."

He wanted to let go, to ease the pressure on his tortured arms. To let the river have him, to relax into its embrace and let things end there. "Why go on?" his mind screamed. "Why try to win? Let go! Let go! Let go!"

Suddenly then, it seemed to his fogged, tortured brain that his pony had gained strength. It was going ahead faster. The awful downward rush of man and beast had slowed—the horse was walking! It had reached the shallows on the other side! With a foothold on the slimy river bed, the pony gallantly fought that relentless tide.

Wild hope lent new strength pulsing through the outlaw's veins. He croaked encouragement to his horse, lowered his own aching legs experimentally, and found solidness. Not solidness—it was sucking, grasping mud his feet sank into. But he could walk! They had won!

He hardly knew how the nightmare ended. The last few yards were hell. The river seemed to boil in fury at their escape; rain pelted down in angry torrents. Johnny did not walk the last few feet to the river's

shore—he was dragged. As they came out of the water he fell, still hanging to his horse's tail. The beast dragged him up out of the growling current.

Dallas uncurled his numbed fingers from the horse's tail and plunged to the wet earth. For a long time he lay there, exhausted, full of pain, his mind a dull vacuum. Finally, then, he lifted his head and got painfully to his feet. Like a faithful retainer, to whom death alone was a bar to duty, the pony stood beside him, gallant head down, great body exhausted.

"Good old hoss," Johnny Dallas muttered, and tears came to his eyes. "Good old hoss—did more for me than any man has ever done..." He turned, then, and faced the river, stared toward the opposite shore.

"Beat you," he muttered. "Beat you, you slimy back-shootin' bounty hunters. You'll have to earn the money my blood'll bring, blast you to hell—"

"Old hoss," he said, "we got to be gettin' on." He took the bridle reins in his wet, numbed fingers and turned away from the river.

Johnny Dallas walked without sense of direction. Rain blotted out the world as if it had never been. He had no goal, except a safe haven from the pursuing law.

He tried to think, to plan, but couldn't. Hunger was a live thing, gnawing ceaselessly at his innards. The bullet wound in his shoulder pulsed and throbbed with dull and steady pain. Head down, he plodded on, his mind rioting with hatred.

He looked up at last, and saw a light. He stopped, staring. Yes, it was a light, showing dim and ghost-like through the rain. Johnny Dallas shook his head. The light stayed.

He wanted to run toward it. "A light, hoss," he muttered, as if trying to convince himself that it was real. He could not hurry. His aching body would not let him. He plodded on.

Rain came down in torrents, thunder

grumbled and snarled off over the peaks, and lightning cut dazzling, zig-zag swaths through the leaden sky. The light came nearer. Its fuzziness disappeared gradually, and finally it resolved itself into a square—a window.

Lightning suddenly lighted the scene with a blinding glare, and Johnny Dallas saw the outlines of a large 'dobe building—surmounted by a towering cross.

"A mission!" Johnny Dallas thought numbly, and with grim humor. Johnny Dallas taking refuge in a mission...

HE ENTERED the mission yard, sloshing through mud and slime up to a door flanking the lighted window. Rain still beat down as he pounded on the door. He waited a moment and pounded again.

The door opened. Framed there was a robed figure, features in shadow from the light at his back.

"Come in, come in," a gentle, cultured voice urged, opening the door wide. The rain, as if glacial at finding a dry spot it had not reached, gusted in the door.

"My hoss—" Johnny muttered, gesturing vaguely behind him. The Padre peered at Johnny closely.

"Come in," he said. "I will care for your horse."

"No!" Johnny said roughly. "Nobody but me takes care of him. Where'll I put him?"

The Padre motioned. "You will find a barn back there."

Johnny turned away from the door, snatched up the reins and started off into the rain again. The Padre did not shut the door, but stood with it open, rain splashing down around him.

Presently the outlaw came slogging out of the mist, tramped through the open door without looking at the Padre. The missionary closed the door.

Johnny Dallas found himself in a small, sparsely furnished room. A fire burned in a hearth; a single oil lamp flickered on a

table in the center of the room. There were chairs, books. The room was warm and dry. Johnny sank down in a chair, closed his eyes.

The Padre watched him puzzledly, and presently Johnny opened his eyes. He saw a short, gray-haired man, with fine features and eyes of deep, incredible blue. It was a face reflecting understanding, tolerance, sympathy.

"Anybody else here?" Johnny asked harshly.

"I am Padre Julian. I live alone," the man said. He stared for an instant at the dark blotch on Johnny Dallas' soaked shirt. "You'd better get those wet clothes off, son. The fire will dry them quickly—and perhaps I can do something for that wound."

Johnny Dallas looked up sharply, a hunted light in his eyes, then glanced down at his shirt front.

"Yeah, maybe you can." He stood up and started to peel off his shirt. The Padre left the room, and Johnny became instantly alert. The shirt half off, his eyes searched the room swiftly. It was, he saw, the home of a poor man. Instinctively, Johnny recoiled. He hated poverty. He hated anyone to whom poverty did not matter as much as did other things.

He heard the Padre coming back, alone, and relaxed. Padre Julian entered the room, an old robe over his arm.

"Put this on," he said, "and we'll dry those clothes."

Johnny stripped, wrapped himself in the robe, and Padre Julian arranged his wet clothes on chairs near the fire.

"Now," he said, turning back to the outlaw, "let me see that shoulder."

Johnny sat down. The Padre moved the lamp so that its yellow rays fell on flesh, and peered at the wound.

"Bullet?" he asked.

Johnny nodded tightly.

"I can take it out," the Padre said, "though it will hurt some."

"Go ahead," Johnny told him. "I could use a drink, though. And somethin' to eat."

"I have a little wine," the Padre said. "Nothing stronger, I'm afraid. Food will come afterward."

He brought wine and Johnny drank it, grimacing. He had also brought bandage and antiseptic, and the tools he would use to treat Johnny's wound.

"This is no place for doctoring," the Padre said. "Come with me."

Johnny followed him out of the room, down the short hall and into a small room at its end.

"My bedroom," the Padre said.

Peering in, Johnny saw a tiny cubicle containing a bed and small table—nothing else.

The Padre set the lamp on the table. "Lie down, son," he directed. "This will not take long."

Johnny lay down, baring his wounded shoulder. The Padre set to work with antiseptic first, and sickening pain flooded Johnny. It seemed as if the rain outside had increased in fury until it was a thundering roar; the room whirled and lurched around him and waves of sickening pain swept over him. He struggled, but could not retain consciousness. . . .

WHEN he came to, fighting up out of blackness, his shoulder was tightly bandaged. The Padre stood at his bedside, smiling.

"All over," he said quietly.

Johnny nodded, sat up. His head whirled for a moment, but the dizziness left him, and the only sensation he felt then was hunger.

"There is hot coffee and food waiting for you," Padre Julian said. "Do you think you can make it back to my—study?"

Johnny stood up. He felt pretty good. "Yeah, sure. Feel fine. Thanks for fixin' me up."

"I hope I did a good job," the Padre

said. "I don't get much practice with bullet wounds. My charges usually settle their differences with knives." He chuckled. "Really a deplorable habit."

He turned and led the way back to the study. The aroma of hot coffee and food made Johnny feel weak. He glanced toward his clothes. "They dry? I guess I better put 'em on."

"As you wish," the Padre said. "You are perfectly safe here, however."

Johnny looked up quickly, instantly on guard. "What makes you say that?" He reached for his clothes slowly, began putting them on.

"You're running away, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Johnny nodded deliberately. He sat down in front of the food. "Yeah, I am." He went to work on the food, and for a time the only sound in the room was the noise of his ravenous eating. Outside, the wind whined and wailed, and rain beat down in torrents.

After a while, Johnny looked up again.

"I don't always run away. My name is—Johnny Dallas."

Padre Julian, seated opposite him, smiled. "I'm glad to know you, Johnny."

Johnny Dallas frowned. "That name mean anything to you?"

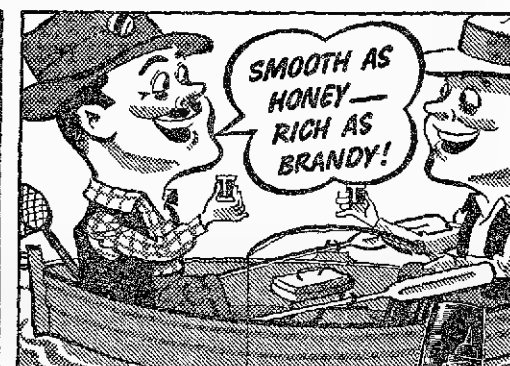
"Should it?"

Johnny hesitated, a flush of anger running through him. "I dunno." He finished eating, settled back. "Thanks for the grub, Padre. I was mighty hungry. . . ." He was silent for a moment. Then: "So you never heard of Johnny Dallas," he said suddenly. "Well, let me tell you, a lot of people have—an' a lot have regretted it. An' a lot more will, before I'm through."

"So? Through with what, Johnny Dallas?"

Johnny felt suddenly contemptuous of Padre Julian. "Through with takin' what I got comin'!" he said harshly. "The whole damn' world is rotten an' it's treated me rotten—so I'm takin' my revenge—wherever I can get it! And those three murder-

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in' bounty hunters who put this lead in me will wish they'd never heard of Johnny Dallas."

"I see." Padre Julian nodded gravely. "I admit that the things you speak of are out of my world. What are bounty hunters?"

Johnny smiled crookedly. "My skin'll bring money to whoever gets me," he said flatly. "Three skunks tryin' to collect it chased me to the river back there. I crossed it an' shook 'em." He regarded the Padre with a sharp, quizzical look in his eyes. "I hope you ain't got any ideas. You look like you could use some money." There was scorn in his words, scorn for anyone who would voluntarily choose poverty as a way of life; who would put service to fellow-creatures above gain for himself.

Padre Julian flushed. "What help I can give," he said, "is given to anyone who needs it. I am sorry if you mean no more to me than does the lowliest peon in the village."

Johnny Dallas reddened angrily. He was confused and bewildered. He did not know how to talk to the Padre; to anyone who did not quail at the sound of his name.

"You mentioned the river," Padre Julian said. "Is it high?"

"Near flood," Johnny said shortly.

"Near flood?" The Padre got up quickly. "Heaven forgive me for my neglect. I hope you will excuse me. I must go."

Johnny looked at him sharply. "Go? Where you goin' this time of night?"

"To the village, a quarter mile downstream. Perhaps the people do not realize their danger. In any event, they might need me." He turned and hurried from the room.

Johnny looked after him in astonishment. The Padre was leaving this dry warm room to go out and look after a village full of Mex peons! It didn't make sense.

IN A moment the missionary returned, dressed for the weather. "You may stay as long as you wish," he said quietly. He

held Johnny with his eyes for the space of a heartbeat, then turned away.

At the door he hesitated. "Perhaps you would like to come? Your help would be welcome—"

Johnny Dallas snorted. "Me? Go out in this storm again for a bunch of good-for-nothing greasers? No thanks, Padre."

Padre Julian nodded soberly. "As you wish." He pulled open the door, ducked out, and shut it behind him.

Johnny stared at the closed door, only half hearing the monotonous rumble of rain beating steadily down. His injured arm began to throb and he got up and paced the room, cursing soundlessly.

Suddenly he stopped in front of the door and stared at it. For a moment he experienced a strange, uncomfortable feeling of emptiness. Unbidden, his mind raced back swiftly over the whole of his life up to this minute, and he could remember nothing now, that had given him any pleasure that he could carry with him.

He opened the door suddenly, slammed it behind him and plunged into the rain. Before he had gone a dozen yards he was soaked to the skin. Slogging through the mud of the mission yard, toward where his horse was stabled, he cursed himself for a fool, wondering what madness was making him do this.

* * *

Half way to the village, he caught the Padre. The missionary, mounted on a mule, rode with his head down against the blinding rain.

Scorn ripped through Johnny Dallas at the sight of the Padre's mount. A mule! God Almighty! Wouldn't you know it! He pulled abreast of the Padre, who looked up, nodded briefly and bowed his head against the rain again.

Johnny felt hot. So, he wasn't even being thanked for dragging his tail out in this wet hell!

The Padre moved closer to him, motioned for his ear.

"I must warn you," the missionary shouted above the noise of wind and rain. "The river is easier to ford near the village. Your pursuers might have crossed there, and taken refuge in the village."

"Yeah?" Johnny shouted back. "So what? I'll take care of those skunks! You just lead the way!"

The Padre nodded, urging his recalcitrant mount to greater effort. Johnny felt a chill. If those three badged killers were at the village. . . .

Johnny Dallas was unarmed. His gun had been lost long before. And he was wounded. He realized that his bravado had been just that. They'd gun him down like a dog, and he'd be able to do nothing.

THE roar of the raging river was like thunder in their ears. In the inky darkness Johnny could see but a few yards ahead, but the Padre motioned suddenly and Johnny peered into the blackness.

The land sloped gently toward the churning river, now plainly visible. Straining his eyes, Johnny saw a dark cluster of 'dobe houses. The village! And already the raging water had eaten into it. Not a sign of life was visible. It huddled, drowned and forlorn—doomed.

The Padre urged his mule faster, and Johnny, casting a swift glance at him, saw the missionary's lips moving. He turned away quickly, somehow ashamed.

The Padre suddenly pulled up short. "They have gone!" he shouted. "There is higher ground to our right. They must have gone to it."

Johnny nodded, content to be led, and followed as the Padre turned his mount sharply and started forward. His heart began to beat faster, as he realized who, in addition to the villagers, might be awaiting him.

"There!" the Padre called suddenly, and looking up, Johnny saw a flicker of light a few yards ahead. Somehow, the refugees had lighted a fire. The Padre called out

in Spanish, kicking his mule into action.

Johnny Dallas felt his muscles tighten. His heart pounded, and stiffness settled on his face. Perhaps, he thought grimly, this was showdown. A bloody end to everything, with the wind and rain sobbing out a dirge.

Abruptly the night was filled with loud cries: "Padre Julian! Padre Julian!"

It seemed to Johnny, hundreds of people, coming out of nowhere, surrounded them.

Padre Julian jumped from his mule and spoke rapidly in Spanish to those nearest him. The entire group began to move toward the fire.

Padre Julian called to Johnny. "Come, Johnny Dallas. The villagers are safe. No one has been lost—"

Someone called something to the Padre. Johnny caught the word "gringos." He tightened up, straining his ears, trying to make sense out of the torrent of Spanish the villagers poured into Padre Julian's ears.

The missionary raised his hand for silence, turned back to the outlaw. "They say three Americans are still in the village—trapped in a 'dobe close to the river. The cloudburst caught them unaware. . . ."

Johnny had remained in the saddle. His eyes narrowed now and he leaned slightly forward. "Yeah? And what's that to me?"

The Padre came closer to him. He lifted his face and looked at Johnny Dallas. He appeared not to notice the rain beating down on him. For a moment he stared into Johnny Dallas' face, then said simply, "I am going after those men." He turned to mount his mule.

Johnny Dallas spurred his mount forward. "Like hell you are!" he shouted. "I'll get 'em myself. And when I do I'll make 'em regret they ever heard my name! Do you think one of these drowned rats of yours can show me where they are?"

The Padre shouted an order, and several men detached themselves quickly from the

crowd. "This way, señor," one shouted.

Just short of the water's foaming edge they stopped, pointing mutely. Staring, Johnny made out a 'dobe shack, several yards out in the racing water. The river churned three feet deep around the 'dobe, and on its roof Johnny made out three huddled figures.

"Hello!" he screamed. "I'm coming out for you!"

The trapped men burst into action. Unintelligible words floated across the river.

JOHNNY twisted in the saddle. Padre Julian's eyes were on him, and Johnny met them. He turned away quickly, leaned down over his horse's ears.

"Sorry, old hoss," he muttered, "but you got to go in there again—an' drag three skunks to dry land!" He spurred sharply.

The tug of the tide was terrific. The pony wavered. Mercilessly using his spurs, Johnny kept the horse on an even keel as it pushed its way through the sucking current. Once more the outlaw was swept by the terrifying feeling of aloneness. There was no one else on earth—just himself—fighting through a hell of churning water and blinding rain. . . .

"You poor damned fool!" he croaked aloud, and after that he found it difficult to think coherently about anything. Instinctively he guided the horse through the raging river toward the isolated 'dobe—almost unaware of the constant ache of his injured shoulder.

With excruciating slowness the weary horse battled through the water. With every passing second their case seemed more hopeless. This was the end. This time they could not beat the raging river. . . .

And then, quite suddenly, the 'dobe was near. Johnny stared at it dully, turned the wavering pony slightly downstream, and in a moment was flattened up against the wall of the 'dobe. The river's surface boiled angrily around the horse's belly.

He caught his breath, bent his gaze up-

ward. Three white, rain-streaked faces stared down at him. He recognized them all—Red Skelton, Joe Burns and Ab May—bounty hunters. Dallas smiled sardonically, knowing that in the darkness they could not recognize him.

He lifted his tired voice in a shout. "I'm takin' you off—one at a time, and I don't know if I can get more'n one of you! This horse is about done—an' I got no more! So one of you come—quick!"

There was a flurry above him. "I'm a-goin' first!" one of them shouted in a high-pitched, terrified wail. Johnny recognized the voice of Red Skelton.

For what seemed an eternity there was no sound from above. Whatever was being done up there was drowned out by the steady drumming of rain and the roar of the river. Then, suddenly, one of the three called down, "I'm comin'!" and started to clamber off the roof.

It was Ab May. Of the other two, there was no sign. Johnny stood in the stirrups, caught the terrified man as he hung from the roof edge, and lowered him to the saddle. May, frantic to be off the 'dobe, had fairly fallen into the leather, and in his haste came down wrong, so that now he sat facing Johnny.

"Gawd!" the bounty hunter croaked. "Let's get out—"

"Look at me close, May," Johnny Dallas said.

"Dallas!" Ab May sucked in his breath. "Yeah. An' what're your two skunk pardners doin'?"

"I dunno," Ab May muttered. "They started fightin'—an' fell off. Just like you're gonna do!" he snarled suddenly, and lashed out with his fist.

JOHNNY had anticipated such a move. He shifted and May's fist missed him by inches. Johnny's own fist lanced out and caught May flush on the chin. The bounty hunter sagged, would have plunged into the churning water if Johnny hadn't

caught him. Straining, he shifted May's limp body until he had the lawman draped over the saddle in front of him.

The horse turned around slowly under Johnny's guidance, headed back toward shore. It staggered suddenly and Johnny cursed.

"Can't carry double, eh, old man?" He slipped from the saddle, locked his fingers on the horse's tail—and hung on.

The water caught them, smashing heavily into the horse and the man he pulled. It was as if they had never left the river since the time they had first entered it to escape from the bounty hunters. Johnny's thoughts whirled.

One thought began to drum through his mind, over and over, endlessly: "*Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this. . . ?*" Over and over, like a tune endlessly repeated, driving everything else out of his mind, numbing him, weakening him. All sense of time, of direction, left him.

Voices, confused and blurred, reached him. He felt a strange sensation of flying, of skimming above the water. His fingers had loosed their hold and his numbed arms hung limply. All around him was confusion; his mind a kaleidoscope of wild, jumbled thoughts. Darkness and flashes of light exploded in his brain, and then just darkness. . . .

* * *

That was when the excited villagers dragged him out of the river; and as they laid him on solid earth, he opened his eyes, and started to his feet.

"No, no, Johnny Dallas," Padre Julian said quickly. "You must rest. . . ."

Johnny ignored him "No," he said, and got unsteadily to his feet. He looked around, into the wet, dark faces of the villagers who crowded around him, into the face of Padre Julian. The rain, unbelievably, had slackened, and he wondered, though it didn't in the least matter, what time it was. Time,

suddenly, had assumed a great importance to Johnny Dallas. Time to do what he knew now he must do. . . .

"Where is he?" Johnny asked the Padre. Padre Julian motioned vaguely. "He is unconscious, but unharmed."

"He's one of 'em," Johnny said quietly. "And the others?"

The outlaw shrugged. "They drowned each other, fightin' to see who'd come first. Where's my horse?"

"Safe. Come now, we will return to the mission. You need food, rest—"

"No. Have 'em bring my horse. I'm leavin'."

The Padre stared. "Leaving, Johnny? But I don't understand—"

Johnny Dallas looked toward the east, the direction from which, long before, he had come. Faint, murky light had begun to show there. He turned back to Padre Julian, smiled crookedly.

"I'm goin' back—that way," he said slowly. A peon led his horse up, and Johnny caught the reins. "Somethin' happened to me tonight, Padre. I guess you savvy There's things I got to settle up, back there." He put his foot in the stirrup.

"Thanks for—everything, Padre," he said quietly. "When I'm square, maybe I'll drift back this way an' see you—if I'm still alive. Until then, adios."

He straightened in the saddle, kneed his horse lightly and rode slowly off.

The Padre, with the wondering villagers grouped around him, stood and watched while the lone rider faded into the slowly ripening dawn. His face was sober as he turned to the villagers.

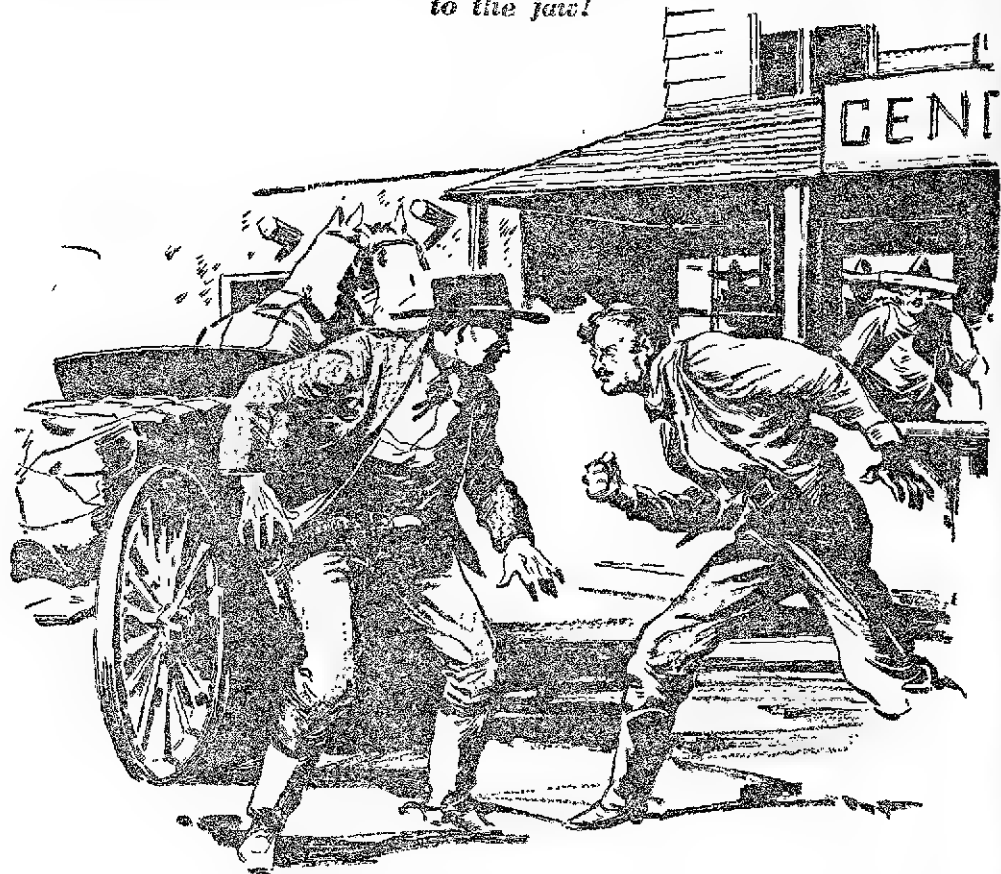
"Take the other one to the mission," he said quietly. "He will need food and rest. Jose, my mule."

His mule was brought, and Padre Julian mounted. He moved off slowly in the direction of his mission. As he rode, his eyes kept straying toward the east, and his lips moved soundlessly. . . .

WILDERNESS SADDLEMATES

By DOUGLAS NELSON RHODES

Together they fought the wilderness and built an empire: Kit Carson, the famous frontiersman, and the big-boned Illinois farm boy who won a mountain man's undying friendship—with an uppercut to the jaw!



He unleashed a mighty right in a lightning uppercut.

DEMAND no quarter and give none. . . . That was the unwritten creed of the frontier, and the first lesson to be learned by all who hoped to carve for themselves an empire in the wilderness. It was a rule which applied not only to marauding redskins and the forces of nature, but to everyday dealings with fellow pioneers as well.

Yet, amid this atmosphere of caution and distrust, the warm spirit of friendship still survived. Frontier history is studded with

stirring accounts of heroism and sacrifice in which self-interest played no part.

Perhaps no story to come out of the old Southwest is packed with more thrills than the seldom-told tale of the close friendship which endured for thirty years between Kit Carson and Lucien Bonaparte Maxwell—the Damon and Pythias of the western frontier.

The account of their first meeting in Taos, New Mexico, in 1838, is replete with all the elements of drama and color which

characterized their vigorous personalities and the illustrious careers they later helped each other build

Kit Carson, then a Government hunter assigned to a company of cavalry stationed nearby, rode into Taos with a couple of his soldier friends one afternoon in search of refreshment and relaxation. They were in high good humor as they hitched their mounts to racks and strode off down the narrow shoulder of adobe which served as Taos' only sidewalk.

The people of the pueblo, going about their daily errands, stepped respectfully aside to make way for their boisterous approach. Soldiers and Government hunters were a privileged group in the Southwest during the 1830's, being the only safeguard against the raiding bands of Apaches and Utes which infested New Mexico

The steady advance of Carson and his companions came to an abrupt halt, however, when they reached a particularly narrow portion of the path and found the passage blocked by a man bending over a huge shoulder pack which rested on the ground before him. The man's head was down. He gave no notice of the party's approach, but leisurely continued to inspect a broken pack strap. Alkali dust covered him like a long gray cloak, and his battered equipment gave evidence of many hard weeks on the trail.

Carson, more in careless banter than in arrogance, stepped forward and raised his voice. "Out of the road, stranger," he commanded. "Make way for the United States Cavalry!"

The crouching figure looked up slowly, pushed back his broad-brimmed hat with studied deliberation and silently stared at Carson. The stranger appeared to be no more than nineteen or twenty, in spite of his large frame and heavy black mustache.

"Make way for the cavalry!" Carson repeated, his loud tone betraying a note of impatience.

The young man remained motionless,

gazing steadily at the boisterous Carson.

"So?" he said slowly, without raising his voice. Then, making no further comment, he calmly resumed his unhurried examination of the strap.

A quick flush of uncontrollable rage, which often caused him trouble during his career, seized Kit Carson. Though only twenty-seven, he was already becoming famous as a man of achievement in the West and was not in the habit of being ignored by insolent young tenderfeet. Grasping the offender by the coat collar, Carson jerked the youngster to his feet.

"When an army man speaks to you, boy, you'd better give him heed!"

THE stranger's black eyes turned instantly to pools of molten lava. Without a word, his left hand whipped down across the hunter's wrist, breaking the hold. At the same time he unleashed a mighty right in a lightning uppercut. It caught the surprised Carson flush on the chin with terrific impact, lifting him a good three inches off the ground. He landed flat in the dusty road fully two yards away.

Carson's cronies stood like blue-coated statues, in open-mouthed astonishment at the swiftness and force of the blow. They made no move to take up the encounter.

Carson pulled himself to his feet. He swayed uncertainly, and gingerly massaged his jaw. Then he ventured a cautious step in the direction of his hard-hitting opponent, who stood calmly watching him, still silent and unruffled.

Carson extended his hand and smiled wryly. "Stranger, I guess I made a mistake," he said. "I'd rather have you for a friend than an enemy. My name's Kit Carson—Government hunter."

The other man relaxed slightly and gripped Carson's hand. "Sorry I hit you so hard," he apologized. "I'm just in from Kaskaskia, Illinois. Name's Maxwell—Lucien Bonaparte Maxwell. I'll be lookin' for a job soon's I get settled, and friends'll

come in right handy—real damn handy!" Thus began the greatest friendship in the history of the Southwest.

The two young men soon found they shared many interests in common. Both possessed an insatiable taste for reckless adventure, loved to hunt and explore, and were deeply interested in the development of the West.

Carson took Maxwell in charge and initiated the former Illinois farm boy into the ways of the hell-roaring frontier. Maxwell turned out to be an apt pupil. He not only learned quickly to adapt himself to frontier life but displayed an extremely shrewd business sense—a trait almost totally lacking in the happy-go-lucky Carson.

Upon Carson's recommendation, he quickly found a job with the American Fur Company, and it was not long before he became a full-fledged trader for the firm. In company with his now inseparable buddy, Kit, he made countless trips into the mountains, trading with the Indians, hunting, exploring. Then one day in 1842, Carson burst into the dingy trading post, breathless with excitement.

"Lucien! Hey, Lucien!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

"What's got into you, Kit?" asked Maxwell, startled by the loud commotion.

"Get your saddle and rifle! You and me are goin' to California with Fremont—tomorrow! He's short a couple of hunters and needs a guide over the mountains. I told him we were the best danged guides west of the Rockies, but it was both or neither. He hired us right away—sight unseen, almost."

MAXWELL quit his job that night, and next morning he and Carson rode west with the expedition.

On the trail they encountered hostile Apache war parties. Once, when the two friends were scouting on foot in a deep canyon, several miles in advance of the main column, Maxwell's alert ears caught the

sound of stealthy footsteps above them. He glanced up to see a lone warrior on the canyon's rim in the act of drawing a bead on Carson, who was moving along a few yards in advance, unaware of his danger. Maxwell yelled and blazed away. It was the same lightning-quick, deadly movement he had used with such telling effect on the occasion of his first meeting with Carson.

Kit had just time to hurl himself behind a protecting boulder before the Indian's body thudded on the exact spot he had been standing a second before.

"Hell," said Kit, "I knew a man as quick and accurate as you would turn out to be useful sometime."

They debated the advisability of reporting back to Fremont immediately, but decided on another course. They neatly removed the Indian's scalp and impaled it on a stick. This they placed in a conspicuous spot on the trail, where the expedition could not miss seeing it as it passed.

Later, Kit and Lucien received a severe reprimand from the general for what he considered a serious breach of discipline.

"What will the President think," he demanded indignantly, "when he learns that authorized members of a Government expedition indulge in the barbaric rites of savages?"

Leaving Fremont in California, Kit and Lucien returned to Taos. On the trip back, Carson had opportunity to repay his friend for saving his life. Maxwell stepped into a bed of quicksand while fording a stream. He was nearly submerged—when Carson came along and risked drowning to rescue him.

In 1845, the companions were again with Fremont, then on his third expedition. This time they stopped off at Los Angeles and remained for nearly a year. The following summer found them leading a party of fifteen on an expedition to Washington with important army dispatches.

On the sixth of October, 1846, near Socorro, New Mexico, they met Kearney's

expedition, westward bound. Kearney ordered Carson to give up the dispatches and return as guide to the army. Once more Carson's temper flared. Only the timely action of Maxwell, who thrust himself between them, saved Kearney from a sound thrashing—and Carson from court martial.

They retraced their steps and accompanied the expedition to San Diego. Here they participated in several sharp battles, under Kearney's command, against the Mexicans. Finally the garrison at San Diego became in imminent danger of capture by the Mexicans unless help could be secured from Stockton's army, thirty miles away.

CARSON, Maxwell and Lieutenant Beale—later a General—volunteered for the dangerous mission. For two days and nights they crawled on all fours through the Mexican lines. Then, barefoot and half naked, for four more days they continued over thorny desert ground, until they reached the American forces commanded by Stockton.

Reinforcements, rushed to Kearney's aid, arrived in time to save the San Diego garrison from annihilation. But the daring trio who had saved the day were still in grave danger. Infection set in and for a while it was feared that all three would lose their feet.

All recovered, but it proved to be Carson and Maxwell's last thrilling adventure together. Maxwell returned to New Mexico and settled down, while Carson went on to become one of the most famous men of his time. In fact to become one of the most famous the West has ever seen.

Maxwell, too, became a figure of importance. Through marriage, he acquired ownership of the greatest ranch in the world—the Miranda-Beaubien Land Grant, later renamed the Maxwell Land Grant. It comprised nearly 2,000,000 acres and

covered an area as large as the state of Connecticut.

At Cimarron, near Santa Fe, he built a gigantic manor house of sixty rooms, and held perpetual open-house to all who traveled the Santa Fe Trail. Lucien Maxwell founded the first bank in New Mexico—an institution still in existence today—and developed his great holdings into a fabulously rich property. He became world famous as a host to celebrities and royalty from foreign shores.

He habitually kept \$40,000 cash in an unlocked drawer in the main hall. Though he boasted openly of this fact to the thousands of strangers who yearly availed themselves of his lavish hospitality, he was never robbed.

Kit Carson, for whom Maxwell maintained an apartment in constant readiness, came and went as his whims dictated. Sometimes he was gone for months, and occasionally he remained for as long as a year. Often the two old friends would sit together in front of the great fireplace and talk throughout the long desert nights of the thrills they had enjoyed.

Then on May 23, 1868—almost exactly thirty years from the time they met—Maxwell received word that Carson had died at Fort Lyon, Colorado.

He suddenly lost all interest in his empire. One by one, his vast holdings slipped from his grasp, until even the baronial manor house was gone. Within a few years he was almost completely destitute.

In 1875 Maxwell made a half-hearted attempt to recoup his vanished fortunes by promoting a mining venture. It was a dismal failure, but he continued to live at the camp because he had no other home in the whole world.

The morning of July 25th, 1875, dawned fresh and bright, but Lucien Bonaparte Maxwell was unaware of it. During the night he had slipped off to join Kit on a new and distant frontier.

Condemned as a traitorous native son, Duffy Kildare came home to fight for the war-torn town that had disowned him. But what chance had this Union hero when the drums of Appomattox were still rolling in Texan ears?



"Stand back, you menky he-wolves! You're a disgrace to yourselves and the army you fought with!"

FROM HELL TO TEXAS

Chapter I

YANKEES NOT WANTED

THE wintry bleakness of hard years of war lay in the pale eyes of Duffy Kildare as he curbed his mount in a shady elbow of Moscon Creek, where the

meandering stream began to straighten out, before skirting the cowtown of Dos Pasos. Sandy-haired, bitter-lipped, he loosed the reins, so his trail-stained horse could dip an eager muzzle into the clear water.

The middle-aged man a-saddle beside

By ED EARL REPP

*A book-length novel of
Texans home from
the war*



to stay, like you said you was, are you?"

The lean, sun-burned young cavalry captain kicked his feet out of the stirrups and stretched his long legs, as if trying, futilely, to work out the stiffness gained by four years of fighting in the saddle.

"It's not a question of wanting to stay," he replied tersely. "There's the matter of an estate, and other things that need nosing into. I don't figure on staying forever, but I'll likely be bunking in Dos Pasos for a month, anyway."

The gray-haired sergeant wiped his lips, frowning at the younger man. "I'll tell you somethin', Duffy," he said. "You ain't goin' to hit it off here anymore. This is Texas, an' you've been four years fightin' her an' the rest of the south. Local boy or not,

him took advantage of the shade and coolness of the bosque to remove his Army cap, and mop his red, perspiring forehead. Gray cottonwoods and willows, their roots lost in Moscon's sandy banks, made a drab background for the dusty blue of the two men's uniforms.

With the mouth of his canteen brushing his flat lips, Sergeant Holt Cain paused to growl, "Looks like you're home, soldier! But you ain't goin' to be damfool enough

you're goin' to be just another damn Yankee in Dos Pasos . . . an' they'll treat you accordin'ly. It'll take a long time for folks down here to get over lickin' their wounds an' forgettin' their hatreds. Have you forgotten what happened in the other Texas towns we been through the last few months?"

Duffy Kildare shook his leonine head and loosed his service hat. "I don't reckon I could," he admitted. "It's something new to have women spit at me, and men cuss me out when I walk down a street. But I've lived here all my life. Maybe Dos Paso'll be different. If not, I'll have to tough it out. Either way, I've got to stay a while. Let's ride on, an' have a farewell drink before you leave."

Holt Cain shrugged and followed him through the shallow stream. Then, side by side, the two men headed their mounts toward town.

THERE seemed to be a chunk of lead in Duffy Kildare's slab-muscled chest as they rode toward Dos Pasos. It was more than the dread of homecoming that deepened the lines about his fine mouth, and put darker shadows in his gray eyes. He had seen things, on the long ride back to the little central Texas town, that made him feel older than his twenty-five years. And the sting of his reception everywhere still burned in him.

At Appomattox eight months ago, the Civil War had officially ended. But, for the South, the shadows of a more cruel strife were gathering . . . a war that knew no armistice. The savage fangs of depression were already sunk deeply in the vast Texas rangelands. Millions of mavericks, it was said, were running wild throughout the state, wearing no man's brand, and belonging to anyone with the ambition to round them up.

The ugly word *depression* was new to Kildare, but it rang now on all sides. He saw endless brown clouds, that were scabby

herds of longhorns, grazing the land bare. Men were trying to sell, for a pittance, ranches into which they'd put their life blood—and being laughed at. Vast domains, once great, were now deserted and worthless. He'd seen, with his own eyes, whole towns desperate for food, the women and children in rags, ravaged by the dogs of war.

He and Cain had strung together in Georgia for the long trek west. All the way they had faced the hatred of these desperate people. They cursed them and their blue uniforms, blamed them for their plight. For while Texas men had been away fighting, kin against kin, friend against friend, the cattle had run wild and become a vast herd of gaunt, dangerous outlaws, fleet as deer, tough as whangleather.

A slow anger built up in Duffy as they neared Dos Pasos. He'd had his fill, now, of being called a damned Yankee, a black-guard; of swallowing insults, because he pitied and understood the Southerners' feelings. Hell, he was one of them. But because he'd fought for the cause he thought was right, he was a mongrel dog! He promised himself silently as he rode that he had to fight his way back to respect, that the next man who braced him with insults would taste bared knuckles.

Late August heat lay thick and sultry over Dos Pasos and the bosque land. Kildare's coat was open at the throat and his white shirt gleamed in the sunlight. Sparks kindled on his brass buttons and bright epaulettes. Dust lay in the creases of his holster, and the walnut butt of his service pistol was gray with it. He rode regally in his Army saddle, a figure to command respect wherever fighting men gathered. But now he knew little but hatred and scorn of a brave but vanquished enemy.

A breeze, sharp with the tang of sodden willow leaves, was at his broad back as they rode away from the creek. On their left were small adobe and frame houses, outposts of Dos Pasos. A little farther on, beyond a

dusty plaza, the town itself began. A tight huddle of motley buildings that seemed crowded together for protection from a strife-torn world.

A frown built on Duffy's forehead as he noted a strange contrast between this town and the others they'd passed through. Dos Pasos, strangely, was bustling with activity. Even at a distance it offered an impression of prosperity and vitality that the young army officer could almost feel.

Holt Cain's eyes bugged, and he exploded, "Well, tunnel me with a dum-dum if somethin' ain't wrong here, Duff! Look! A new, red wagon in front of the Mercantile! You can damn me for a Johnny Reb if I've seen such a sight in five hundred miles!"

Duffy was dumbfounded. "Sure enough . . . and look yonder!" He gestured. "There's a woman in a new dress! Looks like Dos Pasos never heard about post-war depressions!"

They pulled their mounts up to a tie-rack, dismounted and made their way slowly down the street, staring curiously, and being stared at in return. They soon discovered that whatever the difference between Dos Pasos' seeming prosperity and the poorness of other towns, it failed to extend to the reception accorded a pair of stray Union soldiers.

Women gathered in their skirts at their approach, and stood icily aside while they passed, as if they were so much filth. Men either ignored them, or formed groups that filled the whole boardwalk, challenging them to pass through.

Because it had long since been found to be the wiser course, the two cavalrymen stepped into the dusty street and went around the sullen knots of hot-eyed men. They saw hostility on every side, and Duffy, more than ever, dreaded the prospect of remaining long here.

"By Harry, somethin's got into this burg!" Holt Cain muttered. "I can't put a finger on it, but it's here. You'd think

cattle was boomin', and business rushin', the way people are buyin' an' sellin'. I—"

"And you'd think Union skunks'd have sense to stay out of a white man's town, mister!" A man's voice, dripping with hatred, drawled just behind them.

Duffy stiffened, and spun to face the speaker. Anger stained the high bones of his leathery cheeks. Cain's hand took him by the shoulder.

"Easy, Duff," he said tersely. "Let him have his fun."

But Duffy's hackles were up. He thrust Holt's hand from him ungentily, stared at the man who had spoken. The fellow was big in a slumped, slack-muscled way, and stood just in front of a small group of men, which had apparently just stepped from a saloon. Hard whiskey gave his face a flaming ruddiness. His heavy lips drooped in a sneer.

All Duffy's pent-up anger and resentment seemed to explode within him. "If this is a white man's town," he bit out, "I'd like to know what you're doing here, fella. They've got to draw the line somewhere, but for a Georgia swamp-rat, you must've come out of a hole without bein' seen."

The beefy man's face drained of all color as he thrust his spade chin at the cavalryman. His foul breath struck at Duffy's nostrils.

"You'll get down an' lick my boots for that, seh!" he grated. "Startin' right now! You hear me?"

"I hear you," Duffy gave back, "but it ain't scarin' me none."

"Then maybe this will!" The lazy muscles of the puncher went into action. His big right fist stabbed out like a pile-driver.

DUFFY KILDARE'S motions were so quick that the onlookers had no time to analyze them. His legs bent slightly, and the puncher's fist whistled over his head. Then the army man brought one up from the sidewalk, and four hard knuckles smashed the side of the man's jaw. His

head shot back, and he caromed off a puncheon supporting the saloon awning, to crash on his back in the street.

He lay there stunned for a moment, blood dribbling from a cut Duffy's punch had opened along his spade chin. Then he was shaking the cobwebs from his brain and scrambling up, his face savage with the lust to kill. His right hand streaked gunward.

"You damned Yankee trash!" he belated. "You won't lay hand on another Texas man!"

Duffy saw he had no chance of stopping gun-play with fists. He condemned himself for using knuckles, instead of matching draws. But it was too late now. Lunging to one side, he tugged at his big Navy pistol. The man was way ahead on the snatch, and his gun cleared first. But Duffy's quick leap aside combined with liquor and brain-fog to make the other miss.

A window crashed behind Kildare as he leaped forward. The long barrel of the Navy pistol arced down and clipped the side of the puncher's head. With a deep grunt the man sagged, recovered himself and, in blind rage, lifted his gun again. Hating to kill the cowpoke, thus earning himself new enemies, the cavalryman lunged aside and in. Again his gun-barrel struck, biting through the other's range hat and into hair and scalp. The man caved, as if pole-axed.

Swiftly Duffy whirled, gun ready, to face the others. "You can all just stay like that," he bit out tightly. "Holt, go get the marshal. We'll get this down on the books right, in case anything comes of it."

Cain, swearing softly at the bad turn of luck, hurried off. He did not have to go far. A tall, thin man came running down the boardwalk towards him. A gun flashed in his hand as he ran; sunlight glinted on the shield on his vest.

Meanwhile, Duffy's attention had been taken by a powerful, square-built man on the saloon steps. The man's wide-brimmed

hat was back off his face, letting thick, brown hair protrude. He was grinning at Kildare.

"You've got what it takes, mister," he said. "Even if you did curry the burrs out of the tail of one of my toughest cowhands showing it!"

Duffy grinned back. "No harm meant," he said. "It was a case of eat or git et."

The marshal, a business-like lawman with a thin face, and small, serious eyes, supervised the moving of the unconscious puncher's limp form. Duffy learned the lawman's name was Hank Leffie; the drunken puncher was Lon Harbold.

A crowd was collecting, and through it all Duffy and Cain were conscious of the heat of scores of hostile eyes. Leffie kept the spectators back from the wounded man.

"Get the doctor, one of you," he grunted. Turning to Duffy, he demanded, "Well, what's your story, young feller? I warn you this looks mighty bad."

"I'll call on these gents," Duffy said, indicating the group that had watched the fracas, "to bear me out in my story. Harbold tackled me and got off a shot before I knew what he was at. I slugged him twice, because he made me."

Leffie's gaze swung to the loungers. "How about that?"

One of them shrugged. "That ain't exactly how I seen it. Looked like him and Lon was arguin' about something before the fight. They both went for their guns at the same time."

A HOT retort surged to the cavalryman's lips, but the tall man by the batwings halted him. "Sam's got it a little twisted," he drawled. "The stranger told it right, Marshal. It don't look like he was at fault, to me."

Duffy did not fail to note the quick respect that greeted his words.

Leffie grunted, "Your word's good enough for me, MacLeod. We'll put it on the books that way, in case Harbold's bad hurt."

Duffy grinned his thanks at MacLeod, and just then the doctor came up. A girl, flushed and with her hair looking considerably wind-blown, accompanied him. The Union man felt the scornful glance she drove at him as the surgeon went to work on the still unconscious man. Contempt flared in her deep-blue eyes.

Presently the doctor snapped his bag shut. "Hurt bad," he informed them. "Skull fracture and, I think, a serious concussion. Mule kick him?"

MacLeod moved in. "Yeah—an Army mule," he grinned. "Take him to the hotel, and do what you can for him, Doc. Put it on my bill. Harbold's one of my men."

With surprising abruptness, the girl's face swung to Duffy's. "Won't you Northerners ever stop spreading grief?" she flared. "Carpet-baggers, spies, scavengers—you've caused as much trouble since the war as during it."

Holt Cain was tugging at Duffy's arm again, but the younger man brushed him off. Cain's face was red and sweating. Discomfort was written all over him.

"Miss," Duffy snapped, "I happen to be a Texan myself. That didn't prevent me from having the courage of my convictions. But the fact that I'm wearing a U. S. uniform doesn't mean I'm on the peck for trouble. The marshal will tell you who's to blame here."

The girl favored him with a bitter look. "A Union man is never wrong, is he? Not

when he's wielding the whip, it seems!" Haughtily, she turned away.

Duffy's cheeks grew hot. He stifled his rising anger, turned brusquely to Marshal Leffie. "I'll be in town a spell, if you want me again," he informed him. "You'll find me at the hotel, too; that ought to make it convenient—cause and effect in the same spot."

Sergeant Holt Cain was limp with perspiration when they left. "God'amighty, kid!" he husked. "Are you trying to start another war? Let's get the hell outa this burg!"

"You get out, Holt," Duffy smiled. "I'm staying on. Not that I wouldn't give a lot to be able to leave with you."

The middle-aged cavalryman replaced his cap and wagged his head. "Well, it's your funeral," he decided. "Me, I ain't in a mood to stick around and argue the point. I'm heading for New Mexico, to a spot near one of the reservations, to raise beef and forget there ever was a war."

"You could do a lot worse," Duffy told him. "Mebbeso I'll be up there cuttin' sign on you before long."

"If you live long enough," Cain amended. "You're makin' your bed in cactus for shore. You'll bust your heart trying to soften these Texan sons o' guns, and you won't never succeed. When that happens, kid, remember—you was warned."

"I'll remember," Duffy said, and he watched Cain hurry down the street



Chapter II

OUTCAST'S INHERITANCE

ON A back street at the far end of town, Duffy stopped before a slatternly adobe house behind a crooked picket fence. This was—home. Home! The word had the empty ring of a false coin.

He'd run away from this house four years ago, away from the dad he loved and the step-mother he hated. Guilt stung Duffy's conscience, as he remembered sneaking off without even leaving a note to his father. But any word at all would have annulled the purpose of his leaving. He prayed Sam Kildare had never learned the reason for his son's disappearance. That would have killed him, just as surely as malaria had actually stricken him down.

Through the screen door, he could see into the cool duskiness of the house. At his knock, someone moved, and a man grunted, "The door, Norie."

At the sound of that voice, Duffy Kildare's face went wooden. Blood surged hotly though his temples. Slowly he took off his dusty cap as a woman's figure materialized back of the screen. He was looking at a woman of perhaps thirty-three, short and rather dowdy, with stringy blonde hair gathered into a knot at the back of her neck. Recognition suddenly came into the woman's eyes—recognition and fear.

"Well—the prodigal son returned!" she said nervously. "What do you want here, Duffy? I s'pose you know your dad's dead?"

"Yeah, I heard of it," Duffy told her. His eyes strayed past his step-mother into the living-room, searching the gloom for the owner of the other voice.

Nora Kildare's pale hazel eyes pinched. She moved as if to obstruct his view. "Well, then, what do you want here?" she demanded. "I sent all your belongin's down to the courthouse, 'case you want them."

As the poor light ceased to hamper

Duffy's vision, he eased the door open and moved inside. "No, that isn't what I want," he said with a hard grin. "I want some words with this polecat friend of yours—Dawse Kaley!"

The heavy-set, baldish man on the sofa came ponderously to his feet, nervousness visible in the working of his jaw. The little purple threads webbing his cheeks darkened. "Well, well!" he croaked. "Glad to see you, boy—"

"I'll bet you are," Duffy gritted, advancing on the hesitating Kaley. "I'll bet you're about as glad as you were when I caught you with my dad's wife, four year's ago."

"Duffy, you got this all wrong," Kaley interposed. "You're goin' off half-cocked. Me an' Norie—"

Duffy Kildare gathered up a handful of Kaley's shirt front. "When the cat's away, the rats hold a circus, eh?" he mocked him. "But the cat's back, mister. And what you're going to get will be no circus! I warned you never to come in my dad's house again—"

Nora Kildare screamed as the tall cavalryman's fist drew back. "Duffy!" she screamed. "*You fool!* Leave him—"

Her last words were choked into a gasp as Duffy's fist chopped Kaley's lips against his heavy teeth. Kaley went down, came up with flailing fists and a curse on his lips.

Duffy Kildare met his rush with neat feints and blocking fists. He put a lean right arm's power into the next haymaker, and Kaley went backward over the sofa. Duffy was right after him, teeth shining in a wicked grin.

This was something he'd longed for during those four years of hell and loneliness! For Dawson Kaley had given him a round lacing the day he ran away from Dos Pasos, and Duffy had been saving him a like one ever since.

Young Duffy had tried to shut his ears to the gossip about Kaley and Nora, his

dad's new wife, that started less than a year after Sam had remarried. He kept his father's admonition always before him:

"You got to love and honor your step-mother, just like she was your real maw. You and me and her will get along fine, if you remember that, an' do like she asks in the little things that are important to a woman. It'll please her, son—and me." He'd said that sincerely, and, just as sincerely, Duffy had promised to try his best. Sam was too old for Nora, of course. But he was lonely, and she said she loved him.

But when Duffy caught them in each other's arms, he forgot what Sam had said. He whaled into Kaley. The lawyer, Sam Kildare's only legal rival in town, was a lot bigger and heavier than the boy, and the thrashing he gave him wasn't forgotten for a long time.

When Duffy came to, his one-track, boyishly-idealistic mind saw only one thing to do, and that was leave home. He couldn't hurt his dad by telling him about Nora. Better that he should think his son was an ungrateful whelp, than break his heart over her. But it was a shock when he learned that Sam had died leaving him no chance ever to explain.

THESE dark thoughts were in Duffy's mind now, as he jabbed savagely at Kaley's reddening features. Nora kept screeching in his ear, and Kaley tried to talk with him, too; but Duffy's blood was hot, and he heard nothing.

Kaley grunted as Duffy's fist probed his lax belly. Instantly he was reeling from a blow over the eye. The orb went red, and swelled shut. With a grunt, he tucked his baldish head and rushed.

Kildare swayed aside. His fist slammed into the side of Kaley's head. Pivoting fast, he brought him around with another blow, and then slashed wickedly into his bloody face. The lawyer staggered back. A final punch over the heart seemed to unhinge his knees.

On all fours, he wagged his head stupidly, making no effort to get up.

Duffy swept up the man's coat and hat from the davenport. With one hand he planted Kaley on his feet. Jamming the hat over his head, he forced the coat into his hands and shoved him toward the door.

"That makes us about one up, mister," he breathed heavily. "Now you get the hell out of here and stay out. I might lose my temper, next time."

He was watching the lawyer's unsteady advance up the street when Nora recalled him. She was standing with clenched fists in the middle of the room.

"You fool!" she hissed. "Oh, you brainless young fool. My name isn't Nora Kildare any more. It's Nora Kaley! We've been married for a year and a half!"

Duffy took his eyes away from Kaley with a jerk. He said:

"My God!"

The exclamation summed up Duffy's complete surprise. It also summed up his amazement that any woman could see herself married to a man like Dawson Kaley.

"You—married—to him!" he fumbled. "You didn't lose much time, did you?"

"What I did is none of your business," she snapped, striking a stray lock of hair from her forehead. "Dawse'll make you pay for this. He's got more rights here than you have, now. He's my husband, and this is my house."

Resentment erased a little of Duffy Kildare's mortification. Somehow he knew a deep satisfaction that this woman no longer bore the same name as he. But her remark had led into the matter that brought him back here to Dos Pasos.

"That's just what I came to see about," he told her quietly. "Dad must have left a will—"

"If you think you're going to get what's rightly mine, you've got another thought coming!" Nora snapped. "This house—"

"Don't get excited," Duffy advised her. "It's not money or property that brings

me back. If Dad left a will, he must have left some sort of instructions for me. A letter, or something."

"Well, he didn't. He never mentioned you after you left."

Duffy idly cuffed dust from his cap. "That's too bad. In that case, I'll have to go down to the courthouse and see just what's what. Dad was too good a lawyer to die intestate. And if I find, for instance, that he left me this house, you're going to find yourself outside, or renting from me. If you want to produce that will, of course. . . ."

Nora Kaley's thin lips formed a tight, white line. Then her hands made a defeated, aimless motion.

"You're a fox, like your father was, ain't you?" she sniffed. "He never was one to do things out in the open and above-board. Not him. Always schemin' and planning behind—"

"Let's see that will," Duffy snapped. He was sick of this house, sick of Nora, soul-sick with the memories it brought into his head.

NORA knew she was beaten. She flounced off, and rattled around in drawers in a back room. Then she was back with some worn, greasy documents. She flung them at him.

"There!" She tossed her head. "And— and don't forget your promise."

Duffy sat down. He opened the will, first, and found it drawn up neatly, in the flawless order Sam Kildare had considered so important in life. He was not particularly surprised to see the following:

To my wife, Nora Smith Kildare, I leave the sum of one dollar, and stipulate that said bequest shall be withdrawn if she contests this will. All other property, real and personal, I leave to my son, Duffield Kildare.

It was about what Duffy had expected. There was a letter, too, and Duffy read it through, with growing hatred for Kaley and Nora.

My dear son:

I know now why you left home, and I respect you for what you tried to do for me. But it had to come, and I'm not blaming Nora too much. There's a wide bridge between the old and the young, and I ain't young any more.

I've got only one thing to ask of you, Duffy; that you should carry on my law work where I'm leaving off. I've schooled you in law since you were knee-high to a brief. You'll get by. These country people need legal help, sometimes, worse than they need a doctor. I'm leaving you all my books and papers. You know as much about law as you need, to set up practice. What more you lack, you'll get by hard knocks. . . .

There was more, but Duffy knew already that the big thing in the letter was that request, knew that his future had been warped by those neat lines of feathery writing. The fluid notions as to his future had set like cement; he owed it to his father's memory to make at least a stab at being a lawyer. His eyes grew hot with tears barely held back, as he scanned the missive.

To break his morbid mood, Duffy crammed the paper in his pocket and strode to his father's office. He found it dusty, uncared for. But right now his thoughts were for the secret compartment, where he and Sam used to keep things that weren't meant for other eyes. Sam would keep money there when he didn't have time to take it to the bank.

It was a hole in the middle of the fireplace: hidden by a wedge-shaped keystone, the smoke-blackened rock would slide easily out of place. Duffy's long fingers went to tugging at the brick. It came away, showering white mortar on the floor. His hands shook a little as he peered into the dark recess. There was money there, all right; sheaves of yellow-backs—bags of specie!

Chapter III

DEPRESSION BUILDS A BOOMTOWN

A LIGHT step behind him caused him to pivot swiftly. Nora was staring, her thin, white features sharp as frost crystals.

"Then there *was* money!" she gasped. "And it's part of mine, Duffy Kildare—"

"Is it, now?" he queried politely.

Nora's tongue dabbed at her lips. "Sam said if ever I needed money, you was to help me," she lied.

"Let's have an understanding," Duffy rasped. "I'm sticking by that will. Fight it, if you don't like it. Kaley'd be just the man for the case."

While Nora stood by, furious, he counted the money and found twenty-three thousand dollars. It took his breath away. Twenty-three thousand was a fortune these times.

A little dizzy, he began stuffing his pockets. But as he tried to brush past Nora, she seized his arm.

"Duffy!" she pleaded. "If—if I just had a couple of hundred. . . . Everybody that has a cent is buying up that gilt-edge stock. I could—"

Duffy frowned "What stock?"

"St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad, of course! Vance MacLeod says a hundred dollars worth of stock will be worth two thousand in a year or so! MacLeod's their agent down here. With three hundred dollars, say, for three shares. . . ."

For the first time, Duffy began to understand Dos Pasos' air of prosperity. He wondered if MacLeod was the smiling, well-built man who had taken his part before Marshal Leffie.

"How is anybody getting the money to buy stock in this kind of a country?" he demanded. "Texas cattle aren't worth the money for cartridges to slaughter 'em."

Nora's thin shoulders shrugged. "Oh—mortgagin' their land and stock for what they can get, I s'pose," she offered. "MacLeod says when the road gets through to Forth Worth, they'll be able to drive their herds there, and sell 'em for almost what they get in Chicago!"

"I haven't heard of any railroad during my wanderings," Duffy argued. "Forth Worth wasn't much het up about it when

I went through. How do you know it isn't a skin game?"

Nora was horrified. "Don't be silly! MacLeod was born and raised in this country. Fought for Lee, too," she put in acidly. "He's got nothing but our best interests at heart. He says Dos Pasos is the kind of cattle range that's going to be the backbone of Texas one of these days, soon as we get a market for our beef. Duffy, if you could even just *loan* me that three hundred. . . ."

Duffy was full to the gills of her whining. So weary, indeed, that he peeled off three century notes and shoved them into her bony fingers.

"There's your gilt-edge stock," he grunted. "May you run it up to six thousand. There'll be a man down later for my books and desk."

With her thanks jarring on his ears, he left the house. He dumped the money into his saddlebags, and headed for the bank.

The Lone Star Trust and Savings looked like a cattleman's bank in boom times, Duffy was thinking as he entered. Conversation and cigar smoke filled the big room. Half a dozen men were talking with an official in back. Two clerks were at the wickets. Duffy deposited his weighty bags on the counter with a sullen clank.

"Like to start an account," he told the teller.

The man's eyes fastened on the bags with interest. "About how much," he queried. "Looks like you're freightin' quite a load there, mister."

"Twenty thousand," the cavalryman told him easily. "Maybe I'll put half of that in a checking account."

The clerk cleared his throat, glancing back nervously towards the rear. Then he reached for the cage latch. "I'll have Mr. Prentiss take care of you," he faltered. "Will you wait a minute?"

Duffy watched him hurry away. A short, solidly-built man in a pin-stripe black suit glanced up hurriedly at the words the

teller murmured in his ear. Suddenly the whole room was conscious of Duffy Kildare's presence.

There was that awkward tension that grows from the presence of a stranger whose status is in doubt. Duffy knew that every eye was on his uniform. He felt the heat of their scornful glances. Only one man disguised his contempt, and that was Prentiss, the bank owner.

He had a smile on his lips when he approached the window. Undersized and swarthy, he wore a look of prosperity. Natty pin-stripe suit and shiny yellow shoes were matched by smooth-shaven skin and carefully groomed hands. He offered Duffy his grip.

"Farley Prentiss," he introduced himself. "You aren't the Duffy Kildare who left here five years ago?"

"The same. The depression doesn't seem to have touched you much, Prentiss. Things seem to be moving in Dos Pasos."

Prentiss shrugged, and his eyes seemed to appraise the entire room. "We can't complain," he said. And, as his glance touched the saddle bags: "You appear to have done all right by yourself, Duffy. How much was it you wanted to deposit?"

"Twenty thousand. How much interest do you pay?"

Prentiss did not entirely hide his breathlessness at the figure mentioned. He reached for a deposit slip, pen and ink. "Six and one-half percent!" he stated. "More than any other bank in Texas is paying. You aren't making a wrong move, mister."

Suspicion tapped Duffy on the shoulder. His eyes were narrow "You—I suppose you invest fairly heavily in this St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad stock?"

FARLEY PRENTISS' eyes met his soberly. "We're backing it to the limit. You won't find a more solid security in the country today. St. Louis-Southwestern is going to be the making of this country, and we've got confidence in the men who

represent it. Vance MacLeod assures me he'll be paying first-rate dividends after the first of the month. I intend to pass those dividends on to my depositors, in the form of increased interest."

Duffy hooked his arm through the saddlebags, swept them from the counter.

"I'm afraid you won't be passing them on to me, then," he said. "I'll take my gilt-edge stock with a smaller percentage of brass. Far as I know, this railroad outfit hasn't laid a tie or driven a spike. Sorry, Prentiss, it's no-go."

Prentiss blinked, stunned. In the back of the room, there was an angry muttering. Someone swore under his breath. "The damned, bull-headed Yankee!"

Anger drained the color from the banker's swart face. His black eyes snapped fiery sparks as he laid the pen down.

"That kind of talk will buy you a lot of unpopularity in this town, Kildare. St. Louis-Southwestern is sound; that point is certain. You're taking sides against the force that is saving Dos Pasos from the ruin that faces all the rest of Texas. We're buying new stock, new land, replacing worn-out equipment with money we can thank the railroad for."

"Just how much new cash," Duffy snorted, "has come to this town from the railroad? Isn't it true that Dos Pasos is doing all its buying on money your bank has loaned on stock and land?"

"That's true. But the facts don't tell the whole story. Within a few months, we'll be getting dividends. Then these loans can be paid off and, if the ranchers wish, new issues of stock can be bought up."

"If the ranchers aren't foreclosed first," Duffy pointed out.

In the rear, two men came angrily to their feet and started forward. Prentiss stopped their advance with a raised hand.

"We won't argue about it, Kildare," he snapped. "But a lot of folks are going to take it unkindly, if you hand them this kind of talk. I don't know as I want your

business now, or in the future. Good day."

Smiling a little, Duffy slung the leather pouches over his shoulder. "No hard feelings," he offered. "But any time you unload your St. Louis-Southwestern for something reliable, I'll be around with my business."

"I gather you don't have a great deal of faith in my company," a man said at Duffy's back. "What have you got against me, Captain?"

Duffy felt the hackles on his neck crawl. He came about swiftly—to stare into the confident face of the man whose puncher he had beaten! Vance MacLeod possessed, in his person and voice, the force of a powerful, calculating fighter. His pearl-gray Stetson cast its shadow over the coldest pair of steel-blue eyes Duffy Kildare had ever looked into. Despite the remarks he could not have failed to hear the Army man make, he kept a smile under his dark mustache, and an easy drawl to his voice.

Duffy said finally, "Nothing, personally, MacLeod. But I'll choose a bank that invests in good, sound government securities every time. As far as I know, your outfit hasn't proved up yet."

MacLeod bit the end off a crooked Italian cigar, spat the black burl outside. "As far as you know—" he quoted. "Captain, I wouldn't talk so loose about something I didn't understand. St. Louis-Southwestern will be paying four percent on all the stock I've sold very shortly. Why don't you climb on the band wagon, before the price begins to skyrocket?"

Duffy had to smile at his brash confidence; turning what could have been a heated argument into a sales talk!

"Nada!" Kildare wagged his head. "Every time I see a skyrocket, I keep wondering how it feels to come down. When your road pulls into Fort Worth, mebbeso I'll be interested. But let me ask you just one question, MacLeod."

The railroad man toyed with the cigar. "Go ahead," he said levelly.

Duffy was conscious that every man in the bank was straining to hear. He knew, also, that behind his affability, the railroad man's temper was drawn to a feather edge. There was cold hatred in those pale blue eyes.

"You talk," Kildare said, "about faith in Dos Pasos and the bosky country. About this section being the backbone of the Texas cattle industry some day. Well, I know there ain't a finer range in the state, myself. But how much faith do you, yourself, have in it? How much of your own money is going into land and cattle?"

MacLeod glanced at the others.

"Ride out and take a look at the Big M ranch some day, Captain," he said quietly. "Better take your lunch and supper, because it covers a lot of territory. Most of the best grazing land in the bosky is in my name. Plenty of high-grade cow stuff is tattooed with my brand, too. You might as well get it through your head now, that Vance MacLeod and this range are as good as rivetted together."

The onlookers were laughing, Prentiss the loudest of all. Duffy's ears burned, but he had the impression that MacLeod's words told only half the story.

"I'll still take government bonds." He shook his head. "Better get yourself a few to fall back on, mister. See you around, MacLeod."

The agent tipped his hat in mock courtesy. Then he was calling after the lawyer "A word of advice, Captain. Shuck those pretty clothes for some civilized duds. The war's over, you know. And down here the ladies don't particularly care for blue uniforms!"

Prentiss and the others roared. When their laughter quieted, Duffy was smiling down from his horse, his words for all of them.

"Don't be too sure about the war being over. A lot of men, who've invested on the spur of the moment, may find the battle's just beginning."

Chapter IV

THE GRIZZLY AND THE FOX

THROUGH the heat of the late afternoon, Duffy rode down to the hotel. He got a room on the street, to take advantage of the evening shade. With a shave, his first in three days, and a bath, he began to feel a little more respectable. Once again his thoughts went to the money Sam had left him.

A great sense of relief poured through him that he hadn't banked it at the Lone Star. Sam Kildare, he recalled, had never trusted Farley Prentiss. Undoubtedly that was why he had preferred a hole in the wall to his prosperous bank. And that was saying a lot, with Nora snooping around!

Duffy let his thoughts dwell on Vance MacLeod for a while.

The smoke of suspicion clouded his mind, every time he considered him and his St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad. He felt sure there was no such outfit actually building a road anywhere. He considered MacLeod no more than a confidence man of a high caliber. But MacLeod was sinking his own money in Texas land and beef.

That was incredible to Duffy. Texas land was worth practically nothing in a bottomless market. Beef—well, you could buy a longhorn anywhere for the price of a day wages for the man who roped him off the range for you. Blooded stock was a little different, even in these times. A good Brahma or Hereford was still worth raising, he guessed. Bosky land, too, should be worth something, if a man had the guts and money to hang onto it for a few years.

Duffy gave it up and turned his thoughts to his own affairs.

There was the matter of getting out some handbills, advertising his intention to continue in his dad's profession. He'd spotted an empty land office down-street where he figured to move in. One more thing bothered him. Dawse Kaley.

With a sour grimace, Duffy decided he owed the man some kind of an apology. After all, he'd been within his rights, this time. Leaving his money in the hotel safe, the cavalryman went out into the glare of the street.

When there is any money at all floating around, saloons can be figured to do a fair business. It was so with the Bull's Head when Duffy pushed into the place and searched the crowd for Dawson Kaley.

There was a score of patrons in the saloon. Yet within five seconds, it seemed, word got around that there was a Union man present. Glasses were lowered to the bar, while the drinkers stared with undisguised hostility. Some men, playing pool near the door, stood holding their cues stiffly.

Duffy located Kaley near the middle of the bar. He trailed his sunflower spurs through the sawdust and stopped beside him. A couple of surly-looking punchers with whom Kaley had apparently been drinking, moved away. Before Duffy could speak to the lawyer, one of them began humming a parody on a Northern marching song, a burlesque calculated to start a fight anywhere.

But Duffy kept his temper.

"I figure I owe you an apology, Kaley," he said quietly. "Nora tells me you two are married now. I'm sorry I went off half-cocked like that."

Kaley's bruised, purpling features soured. "You will be, if you aren't now," he growled. "I ain't forgetting that, Kildare. Now that you've said your piece, you'd better drag yourself out of here. You ain't exactly the fair-haired boy with us."

"If that's how you like it. I hardly expected you to accept my invitation to forget our grudge in a drink."

The big, red-headed cowboy was bawling the words to the song, now. He had his hat shoved back from freckled, sunburnt features and his jaw worked loosely as he sang. Duffy refused the bait as he moved past.

And then in the mirror he saw Kaley nod slightly. In the same instant, the puncher arrested Duffy with a big paw. "You got your guts trying to drink with white men," he sneered.

DUFFY struck his hand down. "You'll eat those words, or wish you had," he breathed, his face white.

"Damned if he ain't declaring himself!" the red-headed one laughed. Cat-swift, he swept his drink from the bar straight into Duffy's face. In the same blur of motion, he went for his gun.

Duffy's head went down, and the drink splattered against his blue cap. He caught the puncher's hand at the wrist and held the gun in its holster. His right hand made a short, chopping motion that broke the man's nose.

Bawling with pain, Red tore away. "Get the damned skunk, boys!" he yelled. "Kill him!"

Duffy stopped his shout with a blow to the belly that doubled him up. Then he piled two wicked punches into his face, and saw him go down dazed and bleeding.

The man's partner came at him with a rush, gun held high for a buffalo blow. Like a cracked whip, Duffy Kildare's lean body lashed forward. The gun-barrel found only the epaulette on his coat. Then his own Colt was out. He whipped the stocky, blond puncher across the eyes with it. Blood gushed, and the man screamed with pain.

But others were piling in on the lone Army man. Bottles flashed, and the men who had been playing pool ran forward with broken off cues. Even the bartender was reaching for a bungstarter.

Duffy dared not level his Colts. The slightest excuse would bring a hail of lead in his direction. He hurled the blond cowboy into the face of the onrushing attackers, and flung an empty beer glass after him.

Suddenly lights exploded in his head as the bartender brought the bungstarter down

in a glancing blow. Duffy had to hook one elbow over the bar to remain erect. He fought for consciousness. It was no guess that if he went down, the irate cowmen would beat him so terribly his face would never look the same.

Another puncher came in low, and Duffy was able to side-step him, and knock him to the floor with a blow to the back of the neck. Then they were on him with savage yells. A fist bloomed up before his eyes and sent him against the bar, dazed. But even as he went down under them, he heard a gun roar and a shrill voice puncture the fight-sounds:

"Stand back, you mangy he-wolves! You're a disgrace to yourselves and the army you fought with!"

Chapter V

OLD SARGE BAYLOR

DUFFY, from his spot in the sawdust, made out the saddle-warped form of a man standing atop the bar, a Sharps in his hands. Short and grizzled though he was, his gun had an immediate effect on the crowd. They melted away from Duffy like boys caught tormenting a stray dog.

The two Duffy had felled lay where they had sprawled. The cavalryman dragged himself to his feet with spinning head. The old timer spat tobacco juice at the feet of the mob.

"Twenty to one!" he sneered. "Even a Union man rates better odds than that. Mebbe his breed did outnumber us at Gettysburg, but that was war. Won't you damned hyenas never learn that the war's over? Kaley, you fight terrific when you can skulk in, and strike from the back. But I never seen you at Gettysburg, on the firin' line!"

Kaley muttered something. But Duffy was staring curiously at his benefactor. He was short, not over five feet five, and a blackened printer's apron hung down to

his knees. A booted foot and a thick pine stump showed below that. Ink smudges were on his face and his steel-rimmed spectacles. There was a liberal quantity of ink, too, in the stringy mustaches that pronged down from a bulbous red nose. With a surge of pleasure, Duffy remembered him.

"Sarge!" he jerked. "Old Sarge Baylor!"

A couple of Confederate medals flashed as the printer twisted to wink at him. "Right you are, my misguided young friend," he admitted. "Come on down here, where you can light out fast when I turn these mad dogs loose. I still ain't guaranteein' you nothin'. Likker an' politics make an onreliable mixture."

Duffy picked up his gun and moved to the front. The old printer hopped down behind the bar and, keeping the crowd under his ponderous rifle, took two quart bottles of whiskey from the shelves. He snapped a wicked look as the bartender swore.

"Shut up, Herb," he advised the muttering barman. "One of these is for what you owe me on last month's printin' bill. The other'n's by way of medicine for the damage you done this younker with your damn bungstarter. Now you all jest stand like you are. If ary man pokes his head out the batwings for five minutes, I'll scatter brains from here to the plaza."

Duffy grinned as he backed out. He knew, from where Kaley's crowd was standing the .45-90 looked a lot less funny. But not until the pair of them were striding down the boardwalk did he feel easy.

"When was I so glad to see anybody!" he sighed. "Last time I laid eyes on you, Sarge, was over gunsights at Bull Run."

Baylor stopped at the door of his printshop and stumped in. "Hell, was you there to?" he grunted. "I left my right laig behind in that'n. But a peg-leg's got its advantage."

He laid gun and bottles on the counter and hoisted himself to a seat. Then he twisted at his peg leg until the wooden dow-

el came out. From the inside of it, he drew an empty glass flask. Yanking the cork from one of the bottles with his teeth, he took a deep drag; then he filled the empty flask and replaced the peg in its socket.

DUFFY chuckled at his actions. Old Sarge sat there nursing his bottle a moment, his lips pursed as he studied the younger man. In former days, Duffy and the old timer had been great pals. Sam Kildare had all his printing work done here, and the greatest treat in the world for Duffy was to be allowed to help set type on it.

"Best thing in the world you could do for yourself," Old Sarge growled at last, "is to get rid of that yooniform. Lucky my press wasn't goin', or I wouldn't never have heard the ruckus."

"You're the second man that's told me that today," Duffy mused. "I haven't been out of service long enough to buy myself some civilized duds. But I'll do it pronto. In a country of bulls like this, I don't fancy myself as a red flag."

Sarge had set fire to his blackened clay pipe. "Next time you feel like adventure, don't go messing with MacLeod's outfit. Dawse Kaley's his lawyer."

"Yeah?" Duffy was not too surprised. "Well, they're two of a kind, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you," Sarge said levelly, "but you said yourself a mouthful. They say Vance MacLeod's God's gift to Dos Pasos. I say this town-full of suckers is hell's gift to Vance MacLeod. You couldn't trade me a share of his stock for a second-hand cud of chawin' tobacco."

"That's what I told MacLeod."

"You told—!" Sarge swallowed. He began to talk quietly, tensely, driving home his points with stabs of the wet pipe stem. "Your daddy used to have a sayin' that one fox has a better chance against a dozen grizzlies, than one grizzly has. That's the spot you're in, if you aim to buck St. Louis-

Chapter VI

THE RULE OF HELL BEGINS

THAT afternoon saw Duffy attired in an outfit less likely to stir up trouble. With dark trousers tucked into old boots, a lightweight shirt under a buckskin vest, he topped the outfit with an expensive, fawn-colored Stetson.

Next morning, in his newly-rented office across the plaza, he prepared for a long wait. It was hard to count on any business for many weeks to come. But, before noon, his first customer rode up and dismounted outside his door. In one glance, Duffy knew her for the brown-haired, blue-eyed girl who had scorned him before the crowd the day before!

She came in briskly, bringing an odor of blue sage that told she had come up from the flats. She was wearing the same hard-used leather riding skirt and a fresh, white blouse. She drew off fringed gauntlets as she entered. Suddenly she saw him and her face blanched.

"You—you're Duffy Kildare!" she faltered. "I had no idea. . . ."

There was a lazy, deep-south twang to her voice that Duffy remembered. "Sorry to disappoint you, ma'am," he grinned a little sheepishly. "Best I can do, I guess, is to send you to Dos Pasos' other lawyer—Dawson Kaley."

The girl frowned impatiently. "No, he won't do at all," she said flatly. Then, shrugging: "I suppose I can forget you're a Union man, if you'll forget my home was Tennessee. After all, this is strictly business."

"Strictly, ma'am," Duffy said soberly. He found a certain satisfaction in knowing that the girl was still a little abashed by running into him so unexpectedly.

"I've come at my father's request," she told him. "I'm Leona Worth. Father saw your advertisement in the *Herald* and asked me to bring you out to see him. We have the Fencepost ranch, you know."

Southwestern. We had a killin' here, two months ago. Luke Tyler began blowing off against MacLeod for bein' a con man. Just after that, a drunken puncher shot him and left town in a hurry. I ain't saying MacLeod paid that puncher off. But if you figure to spout like Tyler did—don't do it! Be smart like a fox, not loud like a grizzly. You'll find it's healthier."

"I don't think MacLeod's so big," Duffy grunted. "Just flashy and smart. He's got everybody in town believing in him, hasn't he?"

"Just about. And he's bought up land and cattle, until he's the biggest cattelman of 'em all. Only other one his size, or near, is Dan Worth. But Worth's stock-lousy himself, so I don't figger he'll last."

Duffy's brow furrowed. "Dan Worth? The name's familiar. Was he a nester hereabouts, when I left?"

"Not him. He came here after the war, with a bag of money to invest and a body shot to hell by two years in a Yankee prison camp. He's got a lot of his health back, but MacLeod's got his money."

Duffy shrugged. He was beginning to weary even of the sound of Vance MacLeod's name. The whole thing disgusted and vaguely worried him. "Well, MacLeod's the town's worry, not mine," he decided. "I'm going to have plenty of grief of my own. I'm going to carry on Dad's business, Sarge."

Sarge's eyes twinkled pale blue behind his square spectacles. "Good!" he said. "Dos Pasos needs a fust-rate lawyer."

"I'll need some handbills, and an ad in your paper. Just something plain—like you used to print for Dad."

Sarge took off his glasses and fooled with the inky lenses. "I get you. It'll seem good to have a Kildare on the books again. Luck to you, boy!"

Duffy Kildare knew, as he made his way down the street through a sea of angry eyes, that he would need all the luck Sarge could wish him.

A shade of resentment hit Duffy. These deep southerners would be a long time getting over the habit of asking outlandish favors. The Fencepost spread was a good ten miles down the bosque.

"Can't your father come in?" he asked. "I hardly feel like leaving the office for the whole day."

"Father isn't able to ride. The trip costs him a lot in strength every time he makes it. If you could. . ."

Duffy felt his ears growing hot. He recalled, now, Old Sarge's statement that Dan Worth's health had been broken in a Northern prison. "Of course!" he said. "Give me two minutes, and I'll be with you."

On the long ride down the valley, Leona Worth did not offer any clue as to the nature of the business that necessitated a lawyer's services. But Duffy found her a pleasant companion. She talked easily and laughed frequently. He received the impression that living in this country had not come easy to her, different as it was from the hills of Tennessee; and yet, somehow, she seemed to fit.

Her eyes fascinated him. They were dark and slumbrous, giving the illusion of a completely pacific nature. But Duffy Kildare had seen southern girls before, whose calm, dark eyes could catch fire so swiftly it took a man's breath away.

When they rode up, Dan Worth was lying on a rawhide cot, in the shade of some mighty oaks that sheltered his ranch-house. Sunlight, spearing through the leaves above him, struck silver glints from his thick, white hair. And, even at a distance, Duffy saw something that made him catch his breath. Worth had only one arm. There had been a one-armed infantry major at Bull Run. . .

Dan Worth was on his feet, leaning heavily on a manzanita wood cane. His well-shaped head, held high, surmounted a ramrod-straight body. He still wore the butternut trousers of a southern fighting man.

His hand was out to the lawyer, but the grip was never completed.

For suddenly recollection sprang into his vital blue eyes. Color leaped into his thin cheeks.

"Kildare!" he gasped. "By the Gods, I thought that name was familiar!"

He whirled on his daughter "Leona, do you know who this man is? This is the Captain Kildare who took my battalion at Bull Run--and sent me to that stinking hole of a prison for two years!"

CONFUSION played havoc with Duffy's tongue. Words would not come. For he was remembering the valiant Southerner, who had fallen, wounded, among his plucky charges, at the bloodiest battle of the war. He, himself, had been responsible for sending Worth to prison.

Leona's cheeks had drained of all color. Her gauntlets lay at her feet, where they had fallen.

Worth's spike-shaped VanDyke trembled. "So you are the young firebrand that massacred my troops! Two hundred of the finest men ever to come out of the South."

"If you will recollect, sir," Duffy reminded, "you were trying to do the same to mine."

Worth shook his cane under the cavalryman's nose. "And if *you* will recollect, I damned near did it!" he roared. "Get off my land, Kildare! Get off! You aren't worthy to—"

"Father!" Leona Worth stamped her foot. "Remember you sent for him. This is unfortunate, but it needn't go any further."

Duffy replaced his hat. "It's all right," he said. "I'm sure I understand your father's position. Nothing hurt me more than to have to help kill courageous men, like those he commanded. Good day, Major."

Worth was calling him back before he had gone ten feet. "Come back here, Kildare," he ordered. "I'm afraid I let myself go again. Leona and the doctor have both

warned me about it. We'll forget whatever stands between us, and make this strictly a business proposition."

"Suits me fine," Duffy smiled. "What was on your mind, Major?"

Worth sat down heavily on the cot. For a while he screwed at the hard ground with the point of his cane. Then: "I've got a mountain lion by the tail, Kildare, and I want you to tell me how to let go of him. Or if the varmint's pelt is goin' to be worth anything, tell me so, and I'll hang on a while longer."

"I take it you're referring to St. Louis-Southwestern stock," surmised the lawyer.

"How did you know that?" Worth demanded closely.

"A lot of people in Dos Pasos are likely wondering what they're going to get for their money . . . a railhead in Fort Worth, or a good, round reaming."

Duffy knew the warm heat of the girl's glance as she took a place beside her father. Disdain, and respect based on the hope that he could help them, blended in her intent features.

"Precisely what I have been asking myself," Worth nodded. "I had eleven thousand dollars when we came here for my health. I bought this ranch for a song and put the rest of the money in Mac-Leod's stock. He promised us dividends within three months. It's been six, now, and I haven't received a cent."

Duffy guessed at the rest. "And now there's an instalment due on some note or other, and you need those dividends to pay it."

"Right. I foolishly borrowed on this ranch to buy more stock! A man can make an awful fool of himself over money. Or maybe I'm not a fool. Maybe there's a fortune waiting for me. That's what I want you to find out, Kildare. Should I hold this stock or try to get rid of it?"

"All I can do is guess," Kildare said. "Personally, I don't think St. Louis-Southwestern owns a rail or an engine. I'd sell

those shares, if I were you. It's a question whether you can, with Dos Pasos greased to the armpits with the stuff. Maybe Mac-Leod, himself, will take it off your hands. But that's only my own, unfounded opinion."

"I want more than a guess!" Dan Worth declared. "If this is going to be something good, I'll try to hang on. Otherwise, I'm unloading right now. I'm retaining you to find out for me as soon as possible, Kildare. Can you do it?"

A thought wormed its way into Duffy's consciousness as he sat listening to the major. After quick decision, he nodded. "I think maybe I can. Tomorrow I'll let you know what I find out. How's that?"

Worth stood up, a trifle shakily. "That's fair enough," he nodded. "And now will you have a drink before you go back, Captain?"

"Not in this heat," Duffy shook his head. "I figure on a pretty heavy afternoon. I'll be seeing you tomorrow, with good news, I hope. At any rate--don't go buying yourself any more stock until then!"

DUFFY loped into town about three o'clock. He came up the bosque, relishing the comparative coolness of the willow-shaded creek. Without pausing even for some badly needed lunch, he headed for the telegraph office and wired the Merchants' Association at St. Louis. The answer was back by the time he wolfed a plate of stew at the Irishman's and returned to the office.

Duffy stared at the message for a full half-minute. His final reaction was to whistle softly to himself and hurry to Old Sarge's printshop.

He found the old printer just putting the evening paper to bed.

"Hold it, Sarge!" he directed, as the one-legged man turned at his entrance. "I'll pay you double your usual space rates for a couple of two-column boxes. But they've got to go in today."

Sarge calmly sat down, twisted off his wooden leg, and took a sizable slug of Forty-Rod. "Let's see what you got," he growled.

He had not taken two looks at the matter Duffy scrawled out, when he threw the papers on the floor and swore.

"Why, you damned young fool!" he choked, unshaven cheeks reddening, eyes flashing dangerously. "I wouldn't print this for my worst enemy. It's murder! You trying to get yourself killed?"

"Never shy from printing the truth," the lawyer counselled. "I want these set-up just as is. And here's the other ad—"

"Listen—Duffy!"

Sarge fastened a claw-like hand on his shoulder. "Is this on the level?"

Duffy slapped the two telegrams on the counter. "It's gospel," he declared. "I wired the St. Louis Merchants' Association to find out if any such railroad had been started there, and here's their answer:

"Replying to your query, St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad has laid twenty miles of track in the last eight months. Firm is small and of doubtful intention, though legally incorporated. You see, Sarge, MacLeod's really on the up-and-up, in the eyes of the law, but he's sure as hell bleeding Dos Pasos dry. I intend to let the whole town know about him. The other thing I want you to print is this: 'Party will pay \$50 per \$100 worth of St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad stock. Apply D Kildare, across from plaza.' Will you do that for me, old timer?"

Old Sarge was dolefully unscrewing his likker-leg again. "So help me, if it's true, I'll print it," he vowed. "It can't do no more than start another Civil War."

Baylor's little four-page sheet hit the street at five o'clock, carrying its load of dynamite. By six, four men had already come furtively into Duffy's small office by the rear entrance, one by one.

All were small ranchers. All told the same, shame-faced story: They had loaded

up on the stock, expecting the dividends to take care of interest and installments on their mortgages. But the dividends did not materialize, and they wanted to sell a few shares for enough to pay the notes. No one else would buy at face value, as they all seemed to be in the same boat.

Just before dark, a cowman Duffy remembered from the past, came in quietly, yet hurriedly. He took a seat where the lamp's yellow rays could not find his face.

He was Abel Blair, a big man before the war, a desperate one now. He was a heavy, slow-spoken fellow, with a tough beard and thick, gray hair. Cold and forbidding with trouble crowding him, Duffy remembered how his eyes could light up with tiny, bright sparks when he was amused. But he wasn't amused now.

"These telegrams!" he muttered, throwing the paper before Duffy. "They're some kind of a joke, ain't they?"

Duffy's eyes showed how miserably conscious he was of the terror in Blair's heart. "I wish I could say so, Abel," he told him. "They aren't, though. They're on the level."

Blair shot to his feet, face working. "That's a cheap lie!" he stormed. "It ain't enough that you helped to ruin the South, you're bounden to see your own friends in the dirt. MacLeod'll make you retract this, Kildare!"

"He can't. It's the truth."

Blair seemed to fight for control. "What about the party that wants to buy stock at half price. That you, too?"

Duffy told him a little more than he'd told the others. He felt that it was a cruel joke, but eventually he hoped it would work toward their own welfare.

"I just wanted to find out how many men were in the same spot a client of mine is," he said. "He borrowed to buy stock, and can't make the grade, now that the notes are due. That's the trouble with the whole town."

Abel Blair grabbed up his hat. "Don't

you worry none about us!" he advised. "We'll be rollin' in money, when you're cussin' yourself for not buying while you could. MacLeod won't let us down. And he'll see to your needin's, too!"

He had hardly slammed the door when the sixth visitor slipped in. And by the look on the battered face of Red Hyatt, the man who had accosted him in the Bull's Head, Duffy Kildare knew that hell was on the prowl!

Chapter VII

FIRST BLOOD IN DOS PASOS

"MACLEOD wants to see you," was Hyatt's surly announcement. He slouched in the doorway, hat dangling down his back from the lanyard, the red evening light behind him.

"He knows where to find me," Duffy snapped.

Hyatt came in, tossed an envelope on the desk in front of the lawyer. With his eyes on the red-headed gunman, Duffy tore it open.

On the fancy, engraved stationery of the St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad, Vance MacLeod had written:

Received of D. Kildare, \$5,000 in payment of fifty shares of stock.

Vance R. MacLeod, Agent.

It was partly curiosity, partly the boldness of it, that sent Duffy reaching for his hat. He jammed the envelope in his hip pocket, motioned Hyatt out the door. "Let's go see him," he said.

"Now you're talking smart," the gunman smirked. He swaggered outside and they proceeded toward MacLeod's office.

Around the corner from the bank, Hyatt unlocked a door and they climbed to the second story. Unconsciously, Duffy loosened his gun in its holster as they went through a second door into MacLeod's office.

Entering the small, tastefully appointed room, Duffy was struck squarely in the eyes by bright lamplight. MacLeod was only a vague blur as he came to his feet from back of a desk and gave Duffy a chair.

The lawyer deliberately moved the chair so that the light was no longer in his eyes. It was an old dodge, calculated to put a man at a disadvantage in case of 45 trouble. He saw Kaley sitting near him, somberly drawing at a cigarette. Herb Cayton, the blond, barrel-built puncher who had sided Hyatt in the saloon brawl, was there too.

For an instant Duffy was wishing Sarge Baylor was nearby. But there would be no miraculous rescues made in this hole-in-the-wall. The cards were dealt. His job was to play them smart.

He took the receipt out of his pocket and sat on the edge of his chair, tapping the envelope against his knee. "What's the gag, MacLeod?" he demanded shortly.

MacLeod put his cigar out, Duffy had to admire the agent's coolness and self-command. His dark, handsome features retained their look of easy complacency; the smile on his lips appeared almost genuine. But nothing could warm those glacier-blue eyes of his, so pale beneath black brows.

"It's no gag, mister," the railroad man said. "I'm just banking that you've got more brains than you want me to think. I thought you were serious about bucking me before. Now I think I get the picture; you'd like to get in on the gravy train without having to shell out any money. Well, I'll play ball."

Doubt scored Duffy's brow. "I still don't savvy."

"Mac's been held up by experts," Cayton snorted. "You can lay off the pilgrim act."

From a desk drawer, MacLeod took a thin packet of gilt-edged bonds. He placed them in Duffy's fingers.

"Fifty shares of St. Louis-Southwestern," he announced. "Five thousand dollars worth. You've got your stake, Kildare; now keep your yap shut about my company."

"Maybe you don't get me," Duffy drawled, getting slowly to his feet, and tossing the stock on the agent's desk. "The ads I ran—"

"Cut it," MacLeod snapped. "I savvy you well enough. You figure to raise enough stink so that people will begin to lose confidence in me. They'll sell out short and cause a run on the road. Better companies than mine have been ruined that way. But you're willing to cooperate, aren't you, for a little bloc of securities? Or have I got you doped out wrong?"

"Plenty!" Duffy cracked out. "If there's any money in this road of yours, it'll all be rolling your way. Those fifty shares won't be worth fifty sacks of makin's when you spring the trap."

KALEY snapped his cigarette into a cuspidor. "We'll still be here long after the dealer's got your chips, Kildare," he grunted. "Maybe you better swing into line, cowboy."

"When I change my mind, it won't be because a tinhorn lawyer warned me to."

"Maybe it'll be because I warned you," MacLeod said harshly. "I'm not asking you, now, Kildare. I'm giving you notice: hands off my business!"

"Sorry. It's my business too, ever since this afternoon," Duffy said enigmatically. On a sudden thought he retrieved the stock. "Maybe I will keep this. I could paper the wall with it some time." Backing to the door, he kept Hyatt, Cayton and Kaley where he could see their slightest move.

Cayton stirred, as though to follow, but MacLeod snapped, "Take it easy. Kildare, you're buying that stock the hard way. I'll be around soon—to collect."

Duffy closed the door, shutting off the sight of four darkening faces. With relief

strong in him, he hurried back to his office.

Sarge was there to meet him, foot and stump propped on the lawyer's desk, blackened stone pipe gripped in his uneven teeth. "You're bunkin' with me tonight," he growled. "Feller with no more savvy than you needs watchin' o' nights. Where you been?"

"Seeing a sick friend," Duffy grinned. "Don't you worry about me. I'll make out. I just left the big noise and he seemed right friendly."

"MacLeod again! Dammit, mister, you don't know him! He's gonna scalp yuh bald!"

"If he gets the chance," Duffy put in. "But I don't aim to let him."

"I hope you're right! Well, have it your own way. But sleep light, son!"

Before he crawled into bed, Duffy took the precaution of scattering balled newspapers about the floor. It was a trick he'd learned from an old trooper in the Army. Sleep came quickly to him, weary as he was.

Toward midnight, his rest broke like a snapped fiddle string. *Someone had kicked one of those papers!*

Duffy's fingers closed on the warm handle of the gun beneath his pillow. In the same instant, something heavy smashed down at him from the left. The lawyer rolled away from the bludgeon, escaping with only a bruised shoulder. He tried to center his gun on the moving, dark target, but the covers tangled it and he fired into the ceiling.

Bedlam seemed to explode in the room. Two more shapes loomed from the foot of the bed. Gunflame seared the blackness. Duffy felt lead puncture the pillow under his arm, heard the whine of a slug caroming off the brass bedpost. But he was moving like chain lightning now.

He struck the floor, went rolling under the bed. He fired twice. He could see three pairs of legs moving down to the foot

of the bed, then someone crouched, preparing to pour flaming hell into him.

Duffy's lean body folded up so that his feet were under him, and the back of his neck was against the bed-springs. He came up like an Atlas, carrying springs, mattress, and covers from their places like a rising trapdoor. The men yelled in surprise as the ponderous mass toppled over on top of them.

Then there was a crash against the door. Someone came hurtling through. Duffy's gun whipped around. In the nick of time, he heard Sarge's wooden leg jarring against the planking.

"Duffy!" came his hoarse cry. "Where the hell are you?"

"Get down and shut up!" Duffy yelled at him. A grin eased the grim set of his lips. Count on Old Sarge to be nearby in a fight!

The next thing he knew of the attackers, they were piling through the second-story window, one after the other. There was the clatter and jingle of spurred boots on the hotel's wooden awning. Duffy sprang after them, snapped a quick shot down into the street. The lead found only boards, as the last of the gunmen dropped from the awning to the saddle of his horse.

Sarge was crawling through the window, pulling the lawyer after him. "Hosses!" he gasped. "I left a couple around the corner before I took the room next door to yours. Come on!"

Excitement poured its hot liquor in Duffy's veins. Here was a chance to follow, to get a line on his attackers. He prayed MacLeod would be among them!

Sarge sprawled in the street after dropping from the awning. He was up in a flash, stumping around the corner. Duffy got a line on the gunmen as they plunged from the street into the dark, screening growths along the bosky. Then he was piling into the kak and spurring after them. As he rode, he stuffed fresh shells into his .45.

In the faint light of a crescent moon, the trees loomed darkly along the quiet stream, each tree a possible ambushade. Duffy raised a hand for a halt.

They sat there in the saddle a moment, heads canted on the side, listening. Suddenly, downstream, hoofs ripped through the shallow water and brush crashed. Sarge was off without waiting for orders. His big Sharps was in his arms, bouncing with every lunge of the horse beneath him.

They kept to the stream, trusting its shallows more than the broken, branch-matted banks above. A minute went by, while Dos Pasos fell behind, and the trees grew thicker and the stream bent sharply toward the Comanche Hills to the west. Duffy's sharp ears were first to seize on the drumroll of hoofbeats bearing away from the bosque.

Without a word he veered up the bank. Fifty yards from the creek, the trees ceased for a narrow clearing. Duffy's heart leaped as he saw the three forms bent over the nubbins of their saddles, tearing for the *palo fierro* clad hummock beyond. Sarge let out a yell and he looked back, startled.

The old Confederate was trying to draw a bead on one of them, quieting his mount as best he could. Just for a second the pony stopped its rearing. In that moment, Sarge's stubby forefinger pulled the trigger.

Duffy knew by instinct which man would be hit. His hunch was right; the central figure screwed violently in the kak, throwing his hands aloft. He went down, and his horse roared on, empty-saddled. Sarge had chosen the middle man to give himself three-to-one odds; if he missed him, he might drop one of the others at either side.

Chapter VIII

PANIC!

AS IF by telepathy, the other two riders split up. One man cut off to the south, the other veered northward. Duffy jerked

his head at the one on the left. "Catch yourself a man!" he cried. "I'll take this'n."

The trees swallowed the gunmen, and Duffy sliced into the brushy copse after his picked prey. Buckthorn ripped at his shirt and levis.

It was dangerous work, dangerous not only because of hidden prairie dog holes, but because his man could turn on him before he knew it.

The going became slower. Ahead, there was the broken scramble and crash of a horse laboring through difficult going. Then a gun spoke. It was far to the right, and the high, sharp crack of it was not Sarge Baylor's buffalo gun.

Duffy faltered. He was listening for the booming response of his partner's rifle. When it did not come, he drew rein, swearing softly. He had lost interest in the chase, as fear for Sarge chilled him to the marrow.

Very soon the racket of the boogered gunmen faded into the night, and there was nothing but the sound of his own horse. He pulled rein.

"Sarge?" he called tentatively.

"Over here, dammit!" an angry voice floated back.

Duffy's throat tightened a little, with relief. He found Sarge Baylor seated at the foot of a big tree, holding a shattered wooden dowel in his hand.

"The gun-lousy polecat!" he ground out. "Shot my leg off at the knee. I'll miss this'n worse than the one I left at Bull Run. You couldn't drink out of that'n."

Duffy had to help him into the saddle, though the old printer swore it wasn't necessary. At a trot, they returned to where the gunman had been dropped. Shock hit them both when they stared at the spot. He had vanished.

Duffy wagged his head sadly. "Polecats they be," he muttered, "but they come back for their dead. No use following them now, old-timer. They'll be holed up and lickin' their wounds."

They headed back for town at a slow gait. Abruptly, the lawyer's hand grabbed the Sarge's arm. His eyes were for the crawling shape making slowly for the creek.

"Wait a minute! Is that a dog sneakin' across that clearing, or—"

Baylor squinted through his steel-rimmed glasses. "Yup!" he decided. "It's a dog, all right. The one I potted fifteen minutes ago. Them skunks don't bury their dead after all."

Duffy shot ahead, swung down hastily beside the wounded man. Sarge's victim collapsed an instant before the cavalryman reached him. Duffy turned him over, exposing the freckled features and glazing eyes of Red Hyatt.

Hyatt snarled at him like a wounded cougar. Blood was on his lips, in his nostrils, on his shirt. He had been drilled through the lungs, front and back.

"Easy, fella," Duffy murmured. "Looks like your pards went off without you. We'll get you back before—"

"Take your—dirty hands—off me!" the wolfish killer gasped. "I don't want—no—part of you."

Seeing that he had only seconds to live, Duffy queried softly, "Why don't you go clean, Hyatt? You owe MacLeod for this."

Hyatt's throat was rattling horribly. "Yeah?" he whispered. "Then give—him this—for me!"

Without warning, he smashed his fist into Duffy's face. Kildare went over on his back, spitting blood from a cracked lip. When he scrambled back, Red Hyatt had played his hole card and left the game.

Duffy Kildare got up slowly, to stand looking down at the dead man. "Well, that's one way of goin'!" was all he could think of to say.

Sarge was trying to climb back on his horse, and finally managing after a lot of swearing and clawing at odd bits of harness.

"We had a fella like him at Shiloh," he

pronounced sadly. "We called him Wild-cat. He sat up o' nights thinking of new cuss words to call the Yanks, and when he got shot he wanted to be stuffed with powder, a fuse put in his mouth, and rode out on his hoss into the Union camp. We mighta tried it, but he was allus so full of bad likker that the stuff likely would've gone off premature. Let's go back, son. I'm an old man, and one gun scrape per night is sec-ficient."

DUFFY had not dreamed of the ruckus he was stirring up when he had Sarge print those telegrams in the *Herald*. But it seemed to take its time about building up, like slow-burning black powder getting ready to go off.

By the next morning, every man in Dos Pasos who owned a share of stock had read the wires and asked around until he found out they were valid. At noon, there was a line three deep in front of Vance MacLeod's office. MacLeod was not there, and word began to be shuttled around that he had skipped.

Barely in time to stop an incipient riot, the railroad man appeared on the street. For a moment, as he appeared around the corner, he stopped like a man who has been struck in the face. Kaley and Herb Cayton looked stunned, too. In the next moment MacLeod's long, hurrying strides were carrying him to his door and the head of the line.

"Whatever from hell!"

Duffy heard his belligerent exclamation, where he sat in the dry, dusty little plaza. He watched MacLeod unlock the door and mount to a position higher than the crowd.

"Now, what in the hell's the meaning of this?" MacLeod bawled. "Well, Blair?"

Abel Blair's fist shook a tattered copy of the *Herald* under his nose. "Is this stuff true, or ain't it?" he challenged. "That's what we want to know!"

MacLeod took the paper and, without so much as glancing at it, flung it to the

ground. "I didn't think you were damned fools enough to swallow that bilge," he scoured. "If you ain't bright enough to tell truth from lies yourselves, don't come crawling to me. Is that all you're pawin' the ground about?"

His voice, deep and resonant, carried to the back of the restless throng. By the very power of his presence, he seemed to hold the cattlemen tongue-tied. But Blair rose to the question once more.

"A man can't help wondering, when he's got his life savin's tied up in this stuff," he countered. "It wouldn't be the first time you've had us guessin'. How about the dividends we was to git three weeks ago?"

The look Vance MacLeod gave him and the rest was the haughty stare a Saint Bernard might bend on a pack of curs at his heels.

"You damned, gutless swine," he sneered. "You'd kick because a gift horse didn't have gold teeth. I told you the dividend would *probably* come through on the seventh. It didn't; principally because the company's pushing the road along months ahead of schedule, and it takes extra money to do it. However, it don't mean those dividends won't come through within the next month. But if you're ready to tuck your tails and slink back into poverty—" Suddenly, to Cayton: "Hold 'em here, Herb. I'll be back pronto."

He disappeared up the stairs to his office. A moment later, he was back with a bulging, black satchel.

"Line up single file!" he ordered. "I'll buy back every share of stock you men want to sell me!"

The sickening thought smashed at Duffy Kildare that he had had Vance MacLeod doped out all wrong from the start. He sat there stunned, watching while eight or ten ranchers sheepishly lined up and began trading their stock for cash. The railroad man's dark features were stone cold. He took three shares from a portly cow-

man, gave him three crisp century notes in return. Kaley, standing behind him, looked less confident as he accepted the stock and held onto it for his boss. His bulbous, veined nose began to grow redder. Herb Cayton leaned against the adobe wall of the bank and built a cigarette for his beefy lips.

Abel Blair and the other big stockholders were hanging back. They had formed a little cluster of doubtful, half-angry men, fingering thick packets of stock while they pondered what to do.

Suddenly Duffy's fingers went up to feel the package of stock he was still carrying. New confidence sprang to life in him at the solid feel of it. MacLeod's giving him the block had been a bribe in any man's language. A grin grew on his lips as he got up and slowly made his way to the crowd.

The line was longer, but it wasn't moving very fast. Every now and then a man near the head of it would drop out and join Blair and the others. MacLeod's audacity had begun to sap their fight-urge.

Duffy was the only one left when he finally came face to face with the agent. Scores of eyes were on him as he slapped the thick sheaf of bonds into MacLeod's hand.

"Here's fifty shares," he grinned. "Five thousand dollars, I think. I'll take the cash and you can have the stock."

MacLeod did not bat an eye. He counted out the money and turned it over to Duffy. Abel Blair forestalled an uncomfortable moment.

"Thought you was shyin' from St. Louis-Southwestern all along," he called to Duffy. "Mebby it's you that's runnin' a sandy!"

"This was by way of bein' a gift hoss," the lawyer smiled at him and his crowd. "I'm just cashin' in his gold teeth. You want a receipt, MacLeod?"

"It's not necessary," the other replied frigidly.

Duffy was on the point of passing by when Cayton flicked his cigarette across the boardwalk in front of him. It caught

the lawyer's attention for an instant, and the gunman muttered:

"I'll pay you for the rest later."

"The rest?" Duffy asked.

"Red Hyatt. That calls for a settlement, too."

"I guess you're right," Duffy nodded soberly. "But stick around a while when you come to pay. I may be wanting to give you a receipt."

WITH five thousand dollars of MacLeod's money in his jeans. Duffy sauntered back to his office. He fully realized the dangerous twist he had given the railroad man's tail, but he knew this, too: MacLeod would be looking for a quick clean-up and a getaway, and it would take a mighty quick piece of work to stop him. There was, on the other hand, the fact that he had sunk a lot of money in bosky land here in Dos Pasos. Maybe a getaway wasn't on his list, but whatever he planned, Duffy intended to crowd him to the point where he showed all his cards.

His duty to Dan Worth was uppermost in his mind right now. With his thoughts on what he would tell the old Southerner, he returned to his office.

There was a light buggy standing in front of the door. That alone aroused his curiosity, but when he entered and found Dan Worth and his daughter there, he was wordless for the moment.

Worth shook his crooked cane at him. "You'd keep a man waiting till he rotted!" he accused. "First time I've had to come to town in a month. What've you found out?"

"Have you seen the *Herald*?" Duffy asked him.

Worth's hand went out to snatch the paper. Silently he perused the articles. When he had finished, he handed the paper to his daughter and sat there staring out the window. Leona finished the messages with eyes wide and shadowed. Both were waiting for Duffy to speak.

"In other words—" Worth breathed.

"You've got a wildcat by the tail," Duffy grunted. "That stock of yours won't be worth a dime when MacLeod lets the bubble break."

"Then why haven't you jailed him?" the Tennessean roared, standing up.

"The law can't touch him. Maybe if I knew what was going on in Farley Prentiss' mind, we could get at MacLeod. But I don't."

Worth showed signs of exploding. His face grew purple, in startling contrast to his silvery hair. Not until Leona slid her arm about his shoulders did he control himself. Her courage made Duffy more than ever want to find a way out for them. There was more than admiration for her in his eyes, for when she looked up at him new color dyed her cheeks.

"What can we do?" she asked him helplessly.

"Five minutes ago you could have cashed it in and saved yourself," Duffy sighed. "It's too late now. MacLeod had the guts to stop a run on his outfit by offering to pay cash at the graveside for all unwanted stock. The bluff worked like he'd figured. No one but a few small holders cashed their shares. Blair and the big men were fools; they decided he was on the level and held onto theirs."

"Saying it straight out," Daniel Worth snapped, "I'm ruined—we're all ruined!"

"That's jumping at conclusions," Duffy made an effort to put confidence in his voice. "I may be able to find a loophole MacLeod forgot to plug up."

Leona's lips framed a slight smile. "But the chances are, Captain," she said, "you won't—will you?"

Duffy was saved having to answer, as two men slowed before the shop and turned in. It was Sarge Baylor, looking deeply troubled, and—Abel Blair.

Blair was laughing. Good-naturedly he slapped Sarge on the back. "Well, you two had to learn somehow!" he taunted

Duffy. "I guess Vance cleared himself, even in your eyes, eh, Kildare?"

"If a dog's hind leg was any crookeder than MacLeod," Duffy drawled, "he'd have to run in a circle."

Slowly, the big rancher's grin died, as he glanced at the other sober faces in the office. Then he snorted, "Aw, hell, you moss-backs give me a pain! I didn't know you ran to chicken-guts, Worth. I'm getting out of here before I catch something and begin to knit doilies!"

"Hold up, Abel!" Sarge said, glancing at him over the tops of his spectacles. "Feller I just talked to told me something you might be interested in. Think it'd interest you too, Duffy."

Blair stopped in the doorway, his broad shoulders nearly filling it, a scowl on his bearded features. "Well?"

Sarge scratched his grizzled pate, a little embarrassed by all the attention he was getting. "Feller named Charlie Goodnight, runs cattle up Panhandle way, just made the first trail drive since the war, this gent told me. This gent was with him as a cow-hand. Seems they ran two thousand head to Fort Sumner, in New Mexico. Sold 'em there to the government for beef for the reservations."

Duffy was on his feet, blood pounding through his temples.

"He's a liar," Blair snorted. "There ain't no gettin' through that way. Crossin' the Pecos is suicide, and the Injuns are on the warpath for five hundred miles solid. Your man was lying, Sarge. There isn't a market for Texas beef noplase."

"Nope," Sarge retorted. "I knowed this boy in the army, and he ain't givin' to stringin' the long windy. Goodnight and his pard, Loving, cleared a damn' good price. And I was thinking—"

"That that trail was going to be as busy as Broadway, in New York!" Duffy clipped. His eyes shone with unaccustomed fervor. "What that means to Texas is that the end of the depression is in sight! We've

thought there was no market for our beef because the southern states couldn't pay for it, and the northern ones were too far away. But the government can buy, and will buy, from here on out! Every fort and every Indian reservation will have to have meat. And Texas is going to supply it!"

Chapter IX

STAGECOACH TO HELL

DUFFY was speaking again, even before the others had fully grasped his meaning. "What that means to Dos Pasos, is this—and it ain't pretty. MacLeod owns half the valley, and holds mortgages on the rest—"

"You're wrong," Blair panted, far less blustering now. "Prentiss holds my note. Most of the others, too. MacLeod ain't the one."

"Same thing," Kildare grunted. "He's got a mortgage on Prentiss. When he starts takin' up the slack in his loop, every one of you is going to get choked out. You borrowed money on your spreads and turned it over to him to ruin you with."

Blair came back into the room, the suggestion of a stagger in his advance. On his splayed fingers, he leaned across Duffy's desk to choke out:

"That's a damned lie! You're a loose-talkin', shyster lawyer. You've—"

His eyes shifting down the street, Duffy raised a hand to stay Blair's words. "Just a minute, Abel," he said quietly. "Sarge, did you spread this news about Goodnight around?"

Sarge scraped at his unshaven cheeks. "Well, yes, in a manner o' speakin'. I printed it in the *Herald* an hour ago."

"Uh-huh. And Farley Prentiss has read it, I judge. He's headin' here on the double-quick!"

He strode to the rear door and flung it open. "You wanted proof, Abel," he jerked. "Here's where you get it. I have an idea

what Prentiss is going to want. All of you get in the back room and keep quiet. Don't argue! In you go!"

When Prentiss came in, Duffy was examining some documents at his desk. Prentiss' rasping tones knifed the thick silence.

"Kildare! Is this another of your practical jokes?"

He held a copy of the paper, still wet from the press. Duffy studied the man, ignoring the paper. He seemed to look through the elegance of Prentiss' attire to the small, frightened soul beneath.

"As far as I know," he shrugged, "that's gospel. Stacks up to something pretty big, doesn't it?"

The banker seemed to wilt into a chair, keeping his haggard eyes on the other's smiling face. "You know damned well what it stacks up to! Ruin for Dos Pasos, for my depositors, for—for me."

"Mostly for you. You trusted MacLeod too, eh? You weren't in it with him?"

Prentiss' small black eyes searched his face. Then he leaned forward. "I was wrong yesterday, Kildare. I'm willing to admit that, now. And I—I want to ask your help."

"No harm in asking."

"It's plain what MacLeod's been about, now. God, if I could have seen it before! His railroad—all it was was a blind to cover his land and cattle workings! He's got the whole valley under his thumb. He owns us body and soul!"

"How far have you gone with him?" Duffy asked narrowly.

Farley Prentiss shrugged helplessly. "All the way. I bought stock with my depositors' money. Sold my notes to MacLeod and re-invested in stock. Now—what am I going to do? I can't sell it; if I admit my mistake, it means the pen. The others will be demanding their money tomorrow at nine o'clock when my doors open. They're bound to wake up now!" He steadied himself by a visible effort. "The only man who can help me is—you."

"I don't see how."

"By depositing that twenty thousand of yours in my bank! It'll hold out long enough to stop the run and get MacLeod."

"That's a fine idea," Duffy scoffed. "I lose my shirt to save yours. How do you propose to catch the he-coon?"

Prentiss looked at him hopelessly. "There must be some way! You're a lawyer, you should be able to do it."

"I don't know how," Duffy shrugged. "You got yourself into this, and now you've got to get out the same way. All I can do is to advise you to tell the story to Marshal Leffie, and have him hold MacLeod in technical custody. That will give us time to investigate the outfit from top to bottom. If there's any way to nail him, you'll be saved."

"That's a hell of a prospect!"

"It's the only one," Kildare said. "You'd better take it quick. All hell's going to break loose in the morning."

Prentiss stood in the door, looking apprehensively up the street. Without turning his head, he muttered, "I suppose you're right. You were last time. I'll get in touch with Leffie tonight. No, maybe—" He turned quickly, and Duffy was quick to note the change that had come to his ferret-like eyes. "—maybe I'd better spend the rest of the afternoon and tonight straightening things up as best I can. The bank's not ready for a thorough examination. I'll tell Leffie in the morning."

"It's your decision," Duffy advised him quietly. "I'll try to hold things down until then."

Prentiss came back to seize his hand. "I don't deserve your help, Kildare," he said heavily, "but for the sake of my depositors, I thank God you're on my side!" He rushed from the office, heading for his bank with head down and hat pulled low over his face.

ABEL BLAIR was a man grown old when he emerged from the back room. Pity filled Duffy's heart, but for his and Worth's mute looks of despair he mustered only empty hope.

"I'm sorry, Abel," he murmured. "For the sake of all of Dos Pasos, I wish I'd been wrong. All I can say is this: Go to MacLeod and demand your money back. Probably it won't do you any good. He's stemmed the tide and won't run his bluff again. Worth, you'd better stay in town tonight. There may be big things doing in the morning and it might be best if you're around."

Wordlessly, the group left the office, leaving Duffy to misery and silence. There was no tinge of vengeance in this situation, for him. The Dos Pasoans had scorned him and his advice, had let him know they wanted no part of him. Now they were in the thorny spot of facing ruin, because they had neglected his counsel. He felt his inability to help them keenly. But the

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

As a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this same Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming glory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a big office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever troubled me, for I have learned how to draw upon the

invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances. You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 11, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 11, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

last page of the story was yet unwritten, and though Duffy could not foresee it, it was the bloodiest page of all.

That night he sat up late, his feet propped on the windowsill where he could watch the lazy comings and going of wagons, horses and men in the street below. Big twilight wielded a gaudy brush over the rangeland, folding away to the snag-tooth Comanche Hills in the east. Along every little ridge, lacy smoke trees hung like puffs from council fires. There was coolness down in the bosky, coolness and shadow; but shadows hide renegade guns too well, so Duffy sat in his room with no lamp to silhouette him.

At eleven o'clock, he rose and prepared for bed. But even as he stooped to tug off his boots, there came a frantic rapping on his door. He drew his gun. "Who is it?"

"It's Nora!" the answer came. "You've got to help me!"

Still fearing a trap, Kildare unlocked the door and let her in. Her face was terror-filled. "Prentiss!" she gasped. "He's leavin', Duffy—on the Sulphur City stage!"

Shock quickened Kildare's pulse, but suspicion still tempered his reactions. "Well, what of it? Hasn't he got a right to?" It had come to him that Nora knew nothing of the situation between Prentiss and the railroad outfit!

"You don't understand!" the woman gasped. "Dawse told me MacLeod's got all his money in the bank. But he never did trust that Prentiss, and he's had an eye on him. Tonight Dawse didn't come home, and I went to the saloon looking for him. They told me him and MacLeod were out at MacLeod's ranch. On the way home I passed the bank—and Prentiss was coming out with a bag in his hand! He's on the stage right now, and it's pullin' out!"

"Why didn't you call the marshal?"

"What could I tell him?" Nora wailed. "He'd think I was crazy. But you know the kind Prentiss is. Duffy, you got to—"

Duffy's gun found leather, and he was shoving the woman out of the way. "If this is a game of yours—" he flung at her. Swiftly he strode down the hall and plunged down the stairs.

Night held the main street. Duffy broke into a run, cut west on Allen Street toward the express office. Excitement stirred him as the gleam of the stage's lanterns showed down the way. The driver's, "Gee-yap!" and the crack of a whip built to his ears. Leather thorough-braces creaked and wooden hubs began to chuckle. Then, from the curb, the coach swung into the street, and headed toward where Duffy stood near the corner.

Kildare's gun was in his hand, ready for the moment when he would spring onto the step-plate and find out whether Nora had been lying. That moment didn't come. As the Concord rattled by an alley, men converged swiftly on it from the darkness. A gun roared and the driver fell from his box.

Someone sprang to the door and it was thrown back. From the dark interior blasted one shot; then lead poured in through windows and doors, and the gun did not speak again. Frozen with shock, Duffy saw the attackers melt away as silently as they had come. With the coach beginning to rattle on unguided, someone heaved a body from the door. Springing down, the man fired two more shots into the body and darted away. Even in the gloom, Duffy was able easily to identify the victim as dapper Farley Prentiss. Then, abruptly, there was movement behind the lawyer. A gun crashed, and Duffy's senses melted into a gyro of whirling lights. . . .

Chapter X

THE KILLER DEATH FORGOT

THERE was faint light in the room where he awoke. A hard pallet was under his back, and his head was bound in

a tight bandage. Giddiness assailed him with the effort of sitting up. Stupidly he stared at the barred window across from him. Now his eyes widened, and he lurched to his feet. Memory flowed back to him in a swift, terrifying torrent.

Duffy sprang to the heavy wooden door, and shouted through the little grilled window, "Marshal! What the hell's going on?"

Pretty soon a door opened and Leffie swung calmly down the corridor. Dawn was pouring its rosy colors through the jail's windows, but it failed to make the place any more beautiful to Duffy Kildare.

"Forgot already, have you?" the marshal inquired. He was grinning a hard, mirthless grin, a half-finished cigarette in his fingers. "Well, mebbe a man kin even forget murder when a slug creases him like it done you. I could've told you before, you'd never like this town. You was looking for trouble when you hit the streets, and you found it. Harbold died last night, by the way, and MacLeod says now he ain't sure but what you was to blame."

Duffy's eyes studied his sardonic features. "Is that what I'm in here for?"

"Young feller, you almost make me laugh," Leffie said sarcastically. "You ain't forgot about killing the Wells-Fargo man and Farley Prentiss, have you? We found you with an empty gun in your fist, lying ten feet from Prentiss in the road. You made a good job of killing him. Three shots in the head and two in the body. He nicked you over the ear, in case you didn't know."

All Duffy Kildare could do was stand there. A picture floated before his mind, Nora Kaley laughing over the way he'd grabbed the bait, Vance MacLeod perhaps paying her off. Plain enough, how he'd been tricked. MacLeod's men pulled the holdup, slugged him, and dragged him out in the road. Well, Prentiss had found his reward, that was one consolation. And that was the only consolation. He was in here on a double murder charge, and it was all over with the Dos Pasos ranchers.

Marshal Leffie was staring at him. "Well, ain't you going to deny it?" he demanded. "You better start whippin' your story into shape. Tomorrow morning you stand trial for two murders. By the way, there's somebody waiting to see you. I'll send her in."

"Wait a minute, Marshal—" Duffy stopped him. "Did they find Prentiss' money on him?"

Leffie laughed out loud. "So that's what you were after! Son, you're going to do the necktie dance for nothing. Prentiss' vault was still full of stock, bonds, and cash when I checked it two hours ago." His laughter drifted hollowly back to the lawyer as he left the block.

OF ALL the pople Duffy would have expected to have visit him, Leona Worth was the last. Her coolness toward him had never thawed. But now he found himself thrilling to the sympathy in her eyes, in the way her small, cool hand came to him.

"All I can say, Duffy," she smiled bravely, "is that I'm sorry—and ready to believe you didn't do it."

His fingers closed warmly on hers. It was strange, to him, how much he wanted her to believe him. "It was MacLeod," he said wearily. "I tipped my hand for a minute, I guess, and—he got me." He told her the story, and the way anger glowed in her eyes at mention of Nora Kaley, reminded him of the first time he'd seen her—windblown, furious, indignant.

"MacLeod's not letting time waste while he gets his pound of flesh," he finished. "I stand trial tomorrow. I suppose Kaley will be prosecuting attorney."

"That's what they're saying," Leona agreed. "Dad said to tell you he'd stand expense of bringing a lawyer from Sulphur Springs to defend you, if you want one."

"I'll take a chance on my own talents," Duffy said. "By the way, have they checked the passenger list on the stage? What I want to know is, who was the other man in the coach with Prentiss?"

"The stage man said there was only Prentiss on the list! Are you sure—?"

"Something's haywire. I watched that other cold-blooded gent fire two shots into Prentiss' head. Say, wait!"

Leona was watching him anxiously. "Yes?" she prompted.

Duffy changed his mind about what he was going to say. "You can do me a favor, Miss Worth—"

"Leona," she corrected, smiling.

Duffy grinned. "Then this'll make the second favor you've done me. Send Sarge Baylor here and tell him to bring his likker leg, if he's replaced it yet. I could stand a jolt right now."

Leona moved away from the door. "If he's alive and sober, which last is a moot question, the way he was carrying on after they jailed you, I'll have him here in ten minutes!"

Sarge was down at the jail in much less than that, although considerably the worse for Forty-Rod. He stood weaving before Duffy's cell, wearing his tattered old gray uniform and peering fiercely over the tops of his glasses at the cavalryman.

"He's gone too far!" Sarge declared thickly. "I'll have his scalp for this."

"What've you been doing to yourself?" Duffy scowled at him. "Of all the times to get polluted—"

"Ain't drunk a-tall! I been diggin' in your lawbooks findin' a way to save you."

"You won't find it there. Tell you where you will find it, though . . . up the valley some place!"

Sarge snorted. "Now who's drunk?" he accused.

Duffy clutched the bars with both hands. "Listen to me, old-timer. Go home and drown yourself in black coffee until you're sober. I'll need you tonight, like I've never needed you. You suppose you could get a file in that likker leg of yours?"

"Shouldn't be shu'prised," Sarge said, beginning to grin. "You want I should come back later?"

"Right away. I'll need all day to get anywhere. I've got to be out of here tonight or I'm as good as hung right now! Soon as the town gets quiet after sundown, you get a couple of horses and have them in a likely spot. We're going places!"

THROUGH the long, wearing day, Duffy alternately sawed on the hinges of his door and dived for the bunk at Leffie's approach. Toward evening, he was beginning to get the job in satisfactory shape. Both hinges were far enough gone that a few more strokes would finish them.

About the middle of the afternoon, with all the bosky in an uproar over the suspected treachery of MacLeod, reports began to drift in of ranchers dispossessed for non-payment of notes held by the agent. Abel Blair rattled into town in an old buckboard. His family, and a few belongings, were with him. His face showed the marks of a vicious fist-whipping.

Standing in the wagon with curious, confused stockholders gathered around him on the ground, he shook his fist in the direction of MacLeod's office. From his cell window, Duffy could just hear Abel Blair's shouted words.

"A fine passel of morons we've been! Givin' ourselves into that snake's hands. MacLeod and his crowd just throwed me out of the house I built thirty years ago. I'm cleaned out, you hear? Just like you're going to be when he gits around to you. And you want to know who was right about him? That boy they've got in jail waitin' to be hung! If you're wuth a damn, you'll go beg his pardon for cussin' him out!"

Duffy had plenty of visitors after that. Men who were willing to forget he had been their enemy for four years, men who had laughed at his warnings a day before. All of them had a handshake, an apology, and a word of hope for him.

Evening came, and then a vast darkness. Clouds obscured the moon and stars. Gradually the noises of the upset town died

out. Someone stopped on the boardwalk before the jail and struck a match to a pipe. Duffy recognized Sarge's face. No word was spoken, but the old-timer went down the alley next to the jail, and Duffy got the message he intended to convey.

No profit in waiting longer, Duffy decided. He finished the hinges and left his cell. The far door did not yield to his gentle push. Locked! he swore to himself. But he knew about how it fitted into the scheme in the room beyond, and drew back for an attempt that would carry all his hopes.

His whole body was racked with the impact of smashing against the door. He went through at a stumbling fall. Marshal Leffie came awake in his chair with a snort. His gun left its sheath, but Duffy had crashed into him and carried chair and all against the wall. The gun went off into the ceiling, filling the room with its warning roar. Duffy wrenched it from the marshal's grip.

"Keep your head and you'll keep a whole hide!" he cautioned. "I'm goin', Marshal, and I'm not stopping for hell or high water. Don't let me see you out of this office for a half minute."

"I'll promise nothing," Leffie said.

Duffy only half heard the words. He was springing for the door and into the warm darkness beyond. He knew Leffie would be in hot pursuit with a fresh gun, but all he wanted was a look at that horse.

Sarge was waiting, already a-saddle, in the vacant lot behind the jail. Without a word, he dropped the reins of a second horse into the lawyer's hand. With the turmoil of yells and scattered shots in their wake, they pounded for the bosque.

There was no stopping them that night. They kept to the water for five miles and forestalled efficient tracking. Once in the rough, cross-grained arroyos that zig-zagged up to the foothills, they knew they were safe.

"Hell of a way to treat a man with a hangover," Sarge gloomed. "Now that you're out, what do you plan?"

"I wish I knew," Duffy admitted thoughtfully. "I'm playing a hunch long enough to hang a man. But I do know this much. The second man in that Concord, the one that got away, is still hiding in the valley. They're saying that MacLeod has laid down a quarantine to stop anyone on his suspicious list from leaving. He's got punchers patrolling it everywhere. Prentiss tried to leave, and look what happened to him. So I figure this man is still around, and I've got to have him at the trial."

"You mean you're going back for it?"

"It's go back, or listen to the owl hoot all the rest of my life. Now, I've got a feeling this gent would head for some deserted nester shack, where he could hide out a spell. Know of a likely one?"

Sarge's brow puckered up. "One or two. There's a cabin not far from here, matter of fact. Want to look?"

"Lead the way," Duffy ordered grimly. "Let me know when we're within a quarter of a mile, and we'll walk then."

The plan went through without a hitch, but their walk was just so much exercise as far as results were concerned. Two more nester shacks were visited, and found to be deserted, with no signs of recent occupation. Then another thought came to the one-legged printer.

"Old Man Corbus!" he exclaimed. "There's your man. He'd hide out Judas himself for a plugged quarter. He's wild an' hairy as a *javelina*, and all morals mean to him is something that comes at the end of a Aesop's fable. He might be your man himself! Want to go see?"

"Why didn't you think of him before?" Duffy approved. "*Vamonos!*"

Chapter XI

BLOOD MONEY MAN

THERE was no light in Old Man Corbus' disreputable shack, where it leaned against a toe of the hills. But at their hail,

he came out with a mighty buffalo rifle in his hands. He still wore a dirty nightshirt stuffed into his pants, and his shaggy gray hair hung recklessly down to his shoulders. He was chewing tobacco, his meagre jaws champing noisily; they said that he had a cud in his cheek even when asleep.

Before the partners knew it, he had swung the rifle so that it rested dead center on them.

"Now, then, you mangy he-wolves," he snarled, "what be you arter?"

Sarge let his rifle drop and raised his hands. "You're a trustin' ol' so-and-so, ain't you?" he sniffed. "We're deppities, Corbus, lookin' for a gent that had a part in the killin' of Prentiss, the banker, last night. We've been wonderin' if you seen any sign of him?"

"Mebbe," the oldster replied. For a moment he eyed them calculatingly with his rheumy old orbs. Then: "What's the reward?"

Sarge dug in his pocket, took out something and said: "Lookit!"

When Old Man Corbus craned forward curiously, Sarge grabbed at his gun and threw a looping left into the side of his jaw. Corbus made a sound like a tormented wolf. Scarecrow-like, he landed all spraddled out, to stare up at the two .45's held firmly in Sarge's fists.

Duffy clapped Sarge on the back and started for the cabin, knowing such a procedure was the only one that would have gained them a look inside. Caution tugged at his heels. Then he heard Corbus' cackling laughter, and turned around.

"Heh, heh, heh!" the old nester wheezed. "That'll buy you nawthin'! I got him hid out in a cave half a mile from here! You won't find him!"

Duffy knew a gnawing despair. A posse could search a week and never find the right cave in this broken section. But two men, with only the night to work, and a dying night, at that. . . .

Suddenly a new thought struck him. He

still carried his wallet with a generous poke of yellow backs in it.

"How does a hundred dollars sound to you, Corbus?"

"Better," the nester nodded shrewdly, beginning to smile. "Make it two hundred and he's yours."

Duffy gave him the money. He said, "Keep your eye on him, Sarge; he's a crafty old buzzard. Bring our man back and keep him hidden until the trial. If he's the one I think, a certain party would massacre him on sight. I'm heading back to try and get my case lined up before nine in the morning."

"I've got you, son," Sarge Baylor grunted. "He'll be there—one way or another!"

Dos Pasos yawned in the first pale, pearl glow of dawn, when Duffy Kildare dropped rein in front of the jail two hours later. Possemen, by twos and threes, were dragging into town after the chase. The restaurants were filled with men satisfying all-night hunger, and a number of horses rubbed sides before the saloon. Street lamps flickered fitfully in the growing dawn.

Duffy went into the jail with hands held high. But the office was empty, so he sat down at the marshal's desk and busied himself with studying his chances to beat the charge saddled onto him.

Very shortly, the tramp of boots came up the walk and Leffie himself turned in. Behind him came MacLeod, Cayton, and a couple of other railroad gunmen. There was an instant of silence; then Leffie exploded:

"Damn me for a shorthorn! If that ain't—"

MacLeod's powerful body was lunging past him, guns dragging from the yellow holsters at his thighs. "We're takin' no chances this time, Marshal—he's armed!"

Kildare had a horrible instant of staring into MacLeod's black gun-bores. The next moment Marshal Leffie slammed the big

railroad man aside and seized his guns by the barrels.

With cold fury drawn in his small eyes, he challenged MacLeod's savage glare. "Don't try that again," he breathed. "You can see as well as I, that his guns lay on the desk. I'll be gettin' the idea you're afraid to have him alive."

Kildare saw fear flicker for an instant in MacLeod's eyes. Then the railroad man gained control. It was as though his bush-whack attempt was a last-chance effort to save a sinking ship. And that did not jibe with the facts; for Duffy was the man who faced a death sentence within a matter of hours.

"Sorry, Marshal," MacLeod apologized. "I—maybe I was too quick on the trigger."

Contemptuously, Leffie turned away, to direct his own gun on the lawyer. "I don't savvy the lights you go by, Kildare," he growled, "but I do know my duty is to get you back o' bars again. This don't change the fact that Judge Buckner will set on your case at ten o'clock. Thanks for the help, boys; I'll get your pay through soon as I can."

Duffy passed those last five hours sitting on his bunk smoking Bull Durhams as fast as his fingers could fashion them. He wasn't conscious of anything but the thoughts that crawled through his brain like columns of marching men. Everything depended on Sarge Baylor's coming through for him; that, and his own hunch being correct about the identity of the second passenger. Dos Pasos would be rocked to the roots if the man was who he thought.

Two minutes before the marshal and bailiff came to take him to the courthouse, Leona's face appeared in the aperture of the cell door. Warmth flooded Duffy's being as he gripped her hand. Unshed tears glistened in Leona's eyes.

"Whatever happens, Duffy," she whispered, "I want you to know this. As far as

you and I are concerned, the North and South don't exist any more. I've been wrong about blaming the North for all our misery; Dad's beginning to realize that, too. I came to tell you that I—I—" Her lips trembled as she tried to say what was in her heart. Suddenly she blurted: "Oh, Duffy! Duffy, dear, you—you can kiss me—if you want!"

Tears weren't far from Duffy Kildare's eyes as their lips met. The bars pressed cruelly against his cheekbones, but for him there was only the deep, burning want of the moment.

Then Leona was pulling back hurriedly, murmuring, "They're coming. Duffy. Just remember that I love you, and . . . and that Dos Pasos is behind you to the man!"

With the stride of boots filling the corridor, Duffy smiled. "I won't forget," he said. "And maybe we'll have a surprise or two for them!"

JUDGE BUCKNER was a white-haired, imposing man of sixty-five, heavy in the shoulders and with the kind of presence that quiets a court without the need of a gavel. As the doors of the courtroom were closed on the excited, perspiring crowd, he let his shrewd eyes go over their ranks. Most of the throng drew from ordinary Dos Pasoans; up near the front, a number of Big M punchers and St. Louis-Southwestern men sprinkled the congregation. Finally the judge's heavy tones sheared the hubbub.

"We'll have order, if you please! Is the prosecuting attorney present?"

Dawson Kaley got to his feet. "Present and ready, Your Honor."

"And the defending attorney?"

Silence gripped the room. The hot sunlight, pouring its blistering rays over a portion of the crowd, imparted a dull heaviness to all sounds.

The bailiff said in a high-pitched voice, "The prisoner will be his own attorney, Your Honor."

Buckner nodded. "Bring him in, quick."

Duffy Kildare saw more kind looks on the faces of the crowd than he had received in days. "I'm ready, Your Honor," he announced.

"You are charged with the murders of Farley Prentiss and Judd Grey," the jurist said briefly. "Mr. Kaley, you may call your first witness."

Kaley was all business, laying out papers on his table and fixing a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on his large nose. Without looking up, he called, "Mrs. Dawson Kaley!"

Nora, stiff-lipped and nervous, made her way to the stand. Kaley came over to the box and asked her the routine identification questions. Finally: "Did you see the prisoner shortly before the crime, Mrs. Kaley?"

"I did."

"Tell us about it."

Nora wrung her handkerchief in her fingers, glanced briefly over the crowd. "I happened to be coming home late that night," she said, speaking hardly over a whisper. "What did I see but Farley Prentiss ducking out of his bank with a black bag in his hand! I'd heard he was in trouble, and likely to try to leave town almost any time. I knew the marshal would think I was just imagining things if I called him, so I went and told Duffy about it, him having a lot of money in the bank, as I thought. Duffy was furious! He said, 'I'll kill that sneaking coyote, and by God I'll do it now!' Well, that was all I seen, Your Honor. But I'll swear it was him that—!"

"The court isn't interested in your personal opinions," Buckner intoned. "Your witness, Mr. Kildare."

Duffy went over and studied a paper in his hand so long that Nora was visibly on trigger edge. Abruptly, he shot at her: "You say Prentiss was carrying a black bag, Mrs. Kaley. Do you realize none was found on him, or in the boots of the stage after the murder; and that there was not

a single penny gone from the vaults?"

Nora flushed scarlet. "No, I—I hadn't heard."

Duffy's eyes found the jurist's, then wandered to the tense jury. "It's like somebody was trying to frame a man and forgot a point," he smiled. "That's all, Mrs. Kaley."

Nora fled back into the crowd.

MacLeod's face went darker, and Kaley ran a finger around the inside of his sweat-stained collar. "Herb Cayton," he snapped.

Cayton swaggered to the stand. At Kaley's question, he went into his lines, as though trained in them.

"Yeah, I seen plenty that night. I was leaving MacLeod's office when Kildare ran past me and stopped the stage. He put a slug through Judd Grey, and then dragged Prentiss out of the coach and shot him. Prentiss' gun went off just then, and he winged Kildare."

Kaley looked smugly at the jury. "That's all," he said. "Any questions, Mr. Kildare?"

"None," Duffy grunted.

Then, one after the other, Kaley put four more men on the stand, including Vance MacLeod. Their testimony was similar: That they had personally witnessed the killings.

And Duffy refused to question them all. The crowd was under a restless tension, realizing he had scored only one point. Leona endeavored to capture his gaze, but his eyes stayed on his table top. Kaley finally summed up his case.

"Just remember," he advised the jury, "that this case is being decided on *evidence*—not personal feelings! I have proved beyond a doubt that Duffield Kildare did, with malice aforethought, shoot and kill two men. The state demands the death penalty!" He went back to his seat with the righteous expression of one who has stamped out a sidewinder.

A stir went through the Dos Pasoans. It

was plain that, if any shadow lay about Duffy's shoulders, it was that of a hangman's noose. A jury of his own friends could only have convicted him on such evidence as Kaley had dragged before them!

Chapter XII

BACK TO THE WALL

"YOU have witnesses?" Judge Buckner asked Kildare quietly.

"Only one, Your Honor," Duffy told him. "I'll call him presently, but first I want to make a few remarks."

A stiff, uncomfortable quiet dropped over the courtroom as Kildare rose and placed himself near the judge's desk. Women stopped fanning themselves with their bonnets. The only sounds came from outside; a dog barking in the plaza and a hot breeze rubbing the leaves of the trees against each other down in the bosque.

"It's no secret," Duffy said steadily, "that Dos Pasos is in the grip of an octopus. Vance MacLeod is the octopus and the St. Louis-Southwestern Railroad is the main tentacle he's using. . . ."

"I object, Your Honor!" Kaley leaped to his feet, overturning his chair. "This matter is irrelevant and immaterial and has no place in this trial! Instruct the opposing counsel—"

Buckner slammed his fist down on the desk. "I'll instruct you to keep your advice to yourself!" he roared. "This court don't make any pretense to citified ways and never has. Proceed as of before, Mr. Kildare."

Kaley recovered his chair in fury-filled silence, as Duffy went on.

"Until yesterday, I was the only man fighting MacLeod. To stop me, he offered a bribe, and when that failed he tried to have me killed. That's how Red Hyatt died, not by cleaning his gun as the coroner was informed."

FROM HELL TO TEXAS

Kaley was on his feet again, flushed, excited, shouting. "Is Kildare on trial or is MacLeod?" he shouted.

Judge Buckner motioned to the bailiff. "In a moment you'll be on trial yourself, if you don't keep your seat," he rapped viciously. "Bailiff, put Mr. Kaley out the next time he raises his voice."

The MacLeod bunch relapsed into stony silence, that seemed ready to ignite into violence any moment.

Duffy's voice struck a lower note. "What happened to me, night before last, could have happened to any man who bucked the railroad outfit. It was the neatest frame-up I ever saw. But, gentlemen of the jury, I saw enough before I was knocked out to hang three men—Dawson Kaley, Herb Cayton, and Vance MacLeod! I saw them kill Judd Grey and his passenger . . . and I'm prepared to prove it!"

He strode to the center aisle, shouted, "Sarge—bring him in!"

The double doors banged open, and through them moved Sarge Baylor and his prisoner—Farley Prentiss.

A COUPLE of women nearest to Prentiss fainted. Judge Buckner shot to his feet with fallow features. MacLeod may have been startled, or he may not; he only sat there at his place near the wall and stared—hard.

Duffy ran down and rawhided Prentiss through to the bench. Pandemonium broke loose and Buckner began to pound with his gavel, while Duffy bodily thrust Prentiss into the witness chair. A little order began to be restored, so that even those in back could hear Duffy Kildare.

"Now," Kildare roared, "you're going to hear some real, unprejudiced testimony! Prentiss himself is proof that I didn't kill him; he's going to prove also that MacLeod killed Judd Grey."

It was a turbulent court that listened to the banker's broken testimony. Somehow Buckner was able to get them quiet enough

so that the ragged, bruised caricature of dapper Farley Prentiss could be heard. MacLeod, Cayton, and Kaley were all together near the jury stand.

Duffy leaned close to the banker and ground out, low: "You might as well tell the truth, Prentiss. You haven't violated any law besides mishandling your affairs, and you may beat that rap. Spill the dope on the swine that got you where you are, and I'll help you all I can."

Prentiss nodded dumbly. He wore a dirty, misshapen old suit of brown tweeds. His face was stubbled with black beard and his eyes seemed to have sunken into his head.

"Who was the other man in the coach that night?" Duffy demanded. "The one that took the slugs meant for you?"

"That was Mike Radner, the old drunk that lived across the river," Prentiss half whispered.

"What was he doing in your clothes?" Duffy pried.

"I hired him to wear them. I knew MacLeod had laid down a quarantine on the whole valley, and I'd never get out alive. Radner agreed to go with me, dressed in my clothes and with his hat pulled down over his face, for a hundred dollars. As soon as the stage started, I jumped in from the side without the driver's knowing it. Five seconds later, the stage was jumped and Radner murdered."

Duffy spun to face the courtroom. "Where is Coroner Page?" he shouted.

Page stood up slowly.

"Who identified Prentiss' body before you had him confined?" the lawyer asked him.

Page colored. "Why—nobody! We just sort of took it for granted, him wearing Prentiss' clothes and jewelry. The face was shot to hell by the last slugs that entered the body."

Duffy nodded. "Those were the shots I saw the other passenger shoot into his head, after he was dead. That was Prentiss, of

course. He saw his one chance to get away and gambled for it. He left the money he was stealing—this is my own opinion, which I can't prove—and disappeared."

The throng appeared limp with the repeated shocks they had received. Buckner leaned across the desk towards the banker.

"And who," he queried, "were the men who killed Radner?"

Prentiss said, "I only saw one. That was Vance MacLeod."

IT WAS just then that Duffy knew MacLeod was moving. He whirled to intercept him. The agent had leaped through the window to the ground outside, Kaley beside him. Cayton was trying to follow. MacLeod's face showed above the sill, for an instant, as he directed his revolver at Farley Prentiss and triggered twice.

The banker sagged back in his chair, shot through the head.

Men were shouting, women screaming, and Duffy fought his way through them like a tiger. He ripped a man's gun from his holster as he went. Marshal Leffie, at his place near the bench, fired one shot that dropped Herb Cayton in his tracks. Then Duffy was through the window.

Kaley was on the ground, stumbling awkwardly to his feet. He was unwounded, but held no gun in his hands. Duffy slammed the barrel of his gun across the back of his head as he ran by; the fat lawyer went down on his face with a wheezy sigh.

Duffy was just in time to see the railroad man whirl around the corner, on a giant buckskin stallion. Despair clutched at him as he thought of trying to overtake him in the bosque, mounted as he was on his own pony, one of the most powerful Dos Pasos could offer. He pointed, as shouting ranchers swarmed about. On the point of mounting and joining their chase, he stopped suddenly.

MacLeod was no fool. He wouldn't be leaving fifty or sixty thousand dollars be-

hind. That thought brought Duffy about in a swift pivot, to head in the other direction up the street. His long legs carried him swiftly toward the bank.

His long-shot hunch nearly cost him his life. As he rounded the corner of the bank, a swift, gray shape dashed from the alley. For the second time that day, Duffy was looking into the bores of Vance MacLeod's big Navy pistols.

MacLeod's face was a look into hell. Snarling, twisted, it bore slight resemblance to the mask he had shown his customers a day before. His gun leaped in his hand, spat flame and lead into Duffy's lunging body.

The lawyer found himself flung up against the wall, sick with the agony of a tearing side-wound. MacLeod fired his other gun, but this time Duffy had matched the move.

A black hole dotted the middle of MacLeod's forehead; then scarlet flooded his features and his magnificent body crumpled and went down. Duffy slipped to the ground a moment later.

THE END



They found them that way an hour later, when the fruitless chase led back to town. One of them was dead, and the other lived to tell it in court a week later. Duffy Kildare, still weak with his wounds, proved up on his claims in a manner that would have made old Sam Kildare stand and applaud in his grave.

St. Louis-Southwestern deflated like a broken sack of meal, but every dollar of the ranchers' money was in the bank and MacLeod's safe. A referee saw to the restoration of it.

There was peace along the Moscon bosky, peace that a war had never brought. Cattlemen went back to work, raising blooded stock to take up the Goodnight-Loving Trail. The town took to growing, and the usual trouble and squabbles came with its mushroom growth.

But that was all right with Duffy and his new wife. When there is trouble, a lawyer prospers, and Duffy Kildare kept Sarge so busy running off forms and the like, that the old Confederate swore he was wearing out a likker-leg a week!

Flint Barstow's past decreed he walk alone, even to Boothill's crimson gates—where the son he'd spurned waited, to watch and smile, while killer guns chopped down the left for which to die!



It was the fastest draw he had ever made. Twice his .45 jumped.

The Tinhorn Death Forgot

By DON HUNTLEY

TONIGHT, as every night since this lawless Border town had sprung up, reckless men crowded the bar and gaming tables of the Blue Moon Saloon. Tonight, as every night for the past three months, the dealer at the stud table sat

impassively, the white at his temples shining under the glare of lights, the lines of his face set.

Now, as he turned up the last card, his glance rested for a moment on the rangy player across from him. The man was

taking his losses hard; temper pulling down the corners of his mouth, viciousness narrowing his eyes. But the dealer was not disturbed. Long ago the threat of flashing guns and sudden death had ceased to stir him.

As he started another deal his glance lifted and suddenly fastened on a tall young man near the doorway. Then, for the first time in years, emotion touched Gambler Flint Barstow. A sudden tremor shook him. His face paled. But the next moment he was outwardly himself again, as coldly impassive as before.

Somehow, all through the leaden years, he had known that this meeting with his son was inevitable. He had known that the baby would grow to be a man and would, some day, judge him by a man's standards. Flint Barstow had waited for that day, had dreaded it.

He remembered the cold morning, twenty-two years ago, when he had buried his young wife. He remembered the choked words that had torn themselves from his throat.

"He took her from me! He killed her! I never want to see him again!"

And he never saw his son again, until just now, when he glanced upward and saw the young man sweeping the room with moody eyes. There couldn't be a mistake. A gambler's eyes seldom make mistakes. They glimpse a picture and it is theirs, with every line and color and expression in vivid focus. The boy had *her* high brow and firm, sensitive lips. Flint Barstow knew, because those features were indelibly stamped on his soul.

There was no blind rage in Barstow now. Long ago it had burned into a numbness. And the numbness had faded with the years, leaving him the emptiness and bleakness of a man growing old without wife or kin.

That was when his thoughts had begun to turn to his son. He had built his dreams against the harshness of reality. He and

the boy had been fast partners, fighting, working, living together. The hope in those dreams was the one thing in Flint Barstow's life which made it worth the living. He had known that, inevitably, he must face his son, that he should go to him. But Flint had delayed the trip from week to week, dreading the outcome of the meeting, fearful, deep inside, that his boy might judge as harshly and as blindly as the father had once judged.

FLINT dealt the cards, made his bets. His glance flicked upward, and again he had a picture. Blue-gray eyes were appraising him minutely, critically, with a touch of bitterness in their depths.

The player across the table slammed down his cards and jerked to his feet. "I'll be back," he ground out. And he was gone, brushing aside a bystander and hitting the batwing doors with savage fury.

As Flint rose, bracing himself for this meeting with his son, Ross Hillard, owner of the Blue Moon, came up. "That's tough company yuh're entertainin'," Hillard said. "Better watch him."

Flint nodded, only half aware of the words. He was conscious of easy footsteps moving toward them.

"He's Slim Hart," Hillard persisted. "One of *the* Harts. He's a killer."

"Yes, I know," Flint said.

As Hillard moved away, the boy took his place. "You're Flint Barstow." It was a statement, not a question.

"That's right." Flint noticed that this boy was not young in experience. His guns were swung low, for quick work. The blue-gray eyes were clouded, covering all thought and emotion.

The boy spoke again, his voice stiff, guarded. "I've wondered, at times, what you were like. You see, so far as blood is concerned, you're my father."

For a long moment they measured each other. There was no movement toward a handshake, or any recognition of a bond.

In this harsh land, stoicism was strength, and any show of emotion was a weakness. Flint waited, and the fierce pride that was part of him kept him from making the first move.

"And now that you have seen?" he asked quietly.

"About what I expected." The tone was as cold as the words, and Barstow's son turned to the bar to drink alone.

Flint crossed to a window and gazed somberly at the yellow lights blinking fitfully along the street. It was the way his life had been—blurred and wondering and uncertain. Thinking about it now, he knew that he had been wrong. This boy could have been the one steady glow shining along that course.

He remembered the valley down in the Llano country. He had bought that spread, with the dream of fat stock grazing in knee-deep grass, of himself and his son riding side by side. Now that vision was about to crumble.

Later, when the doors of the saloon swung wide, he turned to see Slim Hart returning. There was contempt and hard amusement in Hart's greeting.

"All right, gamblin' man. I changed my luck." But his voice came quick and edgy when Flint reached to break the seal on a new deck of cards. "That same pack'll do," Hart rasped.

"Suit yourself, Hart."

"I mostly do."

Flint shuffled and dealt, knowing that before the night was gone, he would have trouble with this man. He played as always—coolly, indifferently, with an outward lethargy that was deceiving. And always he was conscious of blue-gray eyes watching him from near the bar. When the boy went out, Flint's face took on an even more mask-like inscrutability. When, an hour later the slow, easy footsteps came again, he sighed deeply, felt some of the tightness leave his nerves.

Then trouble came, as he had known it

would. Hart spat a curse, pushed back his chair and cleared his gun arm.

"So yuh win on three aces!" he rasped, spreading his cards so that two aces showed. "Then how come I got two!" Hot fury drove blood into his face. "Why yuh damned card sharp, the man don't live who can cheat Slim Hart and get away with it." His hand whipped up with a .45.

FLINT rose slowly to his feet, his eyes the same blue hardness that had given him his name. He knew, now, why Hart had insisted on using the old pack of cards. He had found other cards with the identical back design. And Flint knew that Hart, with his maniacal rage, was not bluffing. In another few seconds the twitching finger would empty that gun in a thunderous roar. Slim Hart would laugh humorlessly at the crumpled thing at his feet and walk unchallenged out the doorway.

The room suddenly became deathly quiet. Men were moving cautiously out of the line of fire, edging warily toward cover. Only one figure remained in Flint's range of vision—his son.

He leaned against the bar, to one side and behind the killer, his hands within easy reach of his guns. He knew, as every one else in the room knew, what was about to happen. He alone was in a position to stop it. But he stood there, indifference in every bearing—and made no move toward those guns.

"Pull yore smokepole!" Hart grated. "Quick!" The ruthlessness in his voice almost choked him.

Flint eased his weight to the balls of his feet and watched Hart's breathing. As the flat chest before him shrunk, and just before it was to swell with new breath, Flint dropped. It was as though his legs had been cut from under him. Even as he started down, his right hand flashed to the low-cut holster at his hip. Three times flame spurted through the end of that holster.

Amazement and shock twisted Slim Hart's face. His smoking gun slid from suddenly useless fingers. His knees buckled. He carried the table down with him as he fell.

As quickly as it had stilled, the room came to life. Men were talking and not listening. They gazed at the dead man in awe. They stared at Flint Barstow in even greater awe, as one looks at a man condemned to some sure and very horrible death.

"You know what this means?" Ross Hillard said in a stunned voice.

"Yes, Hillard."

Flint knew all right. Rube Hart and the others, Bo and Slaggard and Morton, would hear of this. They would charge from their hideouts with vengeance blazing in their eyes, and a lifelong hatred driving their steps.

"You've got a day or two, maybe a week," Hillard advised. "There's the river and Mexico. After that it's easy for a man to lose himself in South America."

Flint shrugged. All at once he was infinitely old and weary. Run? He had run only once in his life—from his son. He could not do that again. He was on judgment now, his son's judgment. To run would be to lose, and small chance he might have of winning the boy's respect, of making a bond with him.

"You've got money," Hillard pointed out. The urgency of his voice said the thing which he did not put into words—that to remain here meant certain death.

Flint shook his head slowly, drew his gun and reloaded it. "I'll stay," he said.

LATER, when the crowd had thinned and Flint sat idly at his table, the boy approached. "They say you sometimes teach a gent the fine points of gambling. I'd like to learn. What's your charge?"

There was amusement in the mocking smile which almost got under Flint's skin. The boy was offering to buy something

from his own father. He knew *that* would cut.

"Five hundred dollars," Flint said softly. "Five hundred dollars for five lessons. The teaching comes easy, the learnin' hard." He wondered why the boy was going to this trouble and expense. He knew that his son was justified in extracting almost any punishment from him. Then he put such thoughts from his mind and dealt the cards.

"The first lesson is simple. Never bet unless you got better than an even chance. Stack the pot and your chance of winnin' against the chips you must put up. With the odds against you you're bound to come out on the short end. With the odds even, you can play a lifetime and end right where you started. Bet when the odds are with you. Bet 'em high."

Watching the boy take in those words, Flint was struck by the deep restlessness and the dynamic energy under that easy-going appearance. Flat muscles of spring steel moved slow and sure along the boy's arms, across hard shoulders. The place for him was not in a gambling hall, but atop a clean-limbed mustang, racing through wild, sweet clover. There was clover in the Llano country.

"You played against heavy odds an hour ago."

"A man can't drop out of some games," Flint replied. "I teach only this kind." But there was an involuntary urge in him to keep on talking, to tell his son that the odds of life are always against a man, to show him how, in some measure, to increase those odds. Then Flint remembered how the boy had waited, indifferent and unmoved, to see him shot down, and his words came short.

"You have lesson one. Learn it."

"And luck?" the boy questioned.

Flint was already on his feet. "Forget luck. When something is half for you and half against you, it cancels itself."

But he wondered about that as he downed a stiff drink in his room at the

Pecos Hotel. Luck had been with him that night when he faced Hart's gun. How long would it run before turning? There were the others—Rube and Bo and Morton and Slaggard. Five times in a row? No, chance did not run that way—not when the odds were short.

As Flint lay on his bed, exhausted, sleepless, hearing the gray morning hours creep in on that hard, wild town, he couldn't get away from the feeling of steady blue-gray eyes judging him critically, bitterly, and finding him lacking.

AT NOON he awoke to start his day. Thick-churned dust swirled around his boots as he crossed the street, and from overhead the sun blazed down like a pressing weight.

A sudden wave of silence spread down the counter as he entered the cafe. Men glanced at him, and looked quickly down. When he took a vacant stool, those men near him shifted uneasily. He had become, since the night before, a man with a plague, someone to be avoided. It was only a question of time until the Hart brothers burst upon him, guns blazing in total disregard for bystanders.

A tall range-weathered man stopped beside Flint. "Don't be a fool. You can have your pick from my cavvy, and I have friends down the trail."

Frankness came into Flint's eyes. "It's not that, Ace. I—I've got everything that's worth while to lose by leaving."

The man stood there a moment, his far-seeing eyes peering quizzically through the blue spiral from his cigarette. "It ain't a question of bein' called yella. Any man in the country'd make tracks till it blowed over. He'd be considered a fool if he didn't. You know that."

"There's something here," Flint said slowly, "that I'd stake everything on and call it a good bet."

The rancher shrugged wide shoulders and went out. Later, Flint walked the

length of the street, waiting for the sun to lower and the heat to lessen, before starting his game. Through the wide doors of Morrison's General Store he saw the boy talking with misty-eyed Gail Morrison.

As evening turned into night, hard, hungry men drifted into the Blue Moon for drink and entertainment. Flint sat idly at his table. Acquaintances nodded to him and passed on. Only a few sat at his table to play. It was late when the boy pushed open the swinging doors and crossed toward Flint.

"General opinion," he said, "was that you'd pull freight this mornin'. I had a hunch you'd stay. How about lesson two?"

There was something in those words that sent a warmth through Flint. At least the boy didn't rate him a coward.

The next day Flint slept late and woke in the trapped heat of his room, feeling heavy and unrested. His eyes lifted to Carson Ridge, and he felt a need to ride along the quietness of those shaded pine trails. He went to Uncle Jed's livery-stable.

"I'd like to rent a horse for the afternoon, Uncle Jed. One that can take some stiff riding." When the old man suddenly hesitated on his way to the stalls, Flint smiled dryly. "I'll bring him back, Uncle Jed."

IT WAS twilight when Flint left the forest. Noticing twinkling pin points of light far below, he touched spurs to the gelding and swung downward in a long lope. The boy might think that he was not coming, and leave.

Old Jed, dozing with his chair tilted back against the stable wall, came suddenly awake and jolted forward when Flint cantered up. There was a blank, open-mouthed expression on his face.

"I—he—there's—" The old stable owner gestured wildly, choked on his own words.

Flint tossed over some bills. "Some other time, Uncle Jed. I'm in a rush now."

Flint hurried on down the boardwalk, his legs working in long strides, his footsteps echoing hollowly. He had to change from his riding clothes before going to the Blue Moon.

An unusual number of loungers were on the hotel porch as he approached, and they seemed unusually quiet. When he came into the circle of light, someone emitted a startled shout. There was a scuffle of boots and a jingle of spurs as men moved aside and faded into the darkness.

Flint halted, one foot on the low step, instantly tense and alert. A man stepped out of the hotel and onto the porch. He looked quickly about, peered closer at Flint, and stiffened suddenly.

At that same instant Flint caught some intangible feature about the man. He was a Hart—the one with the white scar from chin to temple—Bo Hart. In the same flash of vision, Flint saw the boy under the light of Morrison's General Store, watching the play without taking shelter or making any move toward assistance. Then all of Flint's attention was focused on the man standing rigidly before him.

Bo Hart was the smallest of the brothers, yet he reached nearly six feet. He had the close-set eyes and the short upper lip which characterized them all. Those eyes burned now with the fire of deadly hatred. The big hands, poised near the worn butts of low-slung .45's, were tensed with eagerness.

Flint stood motionless, a little sideways, watching Bo's face, waiting for that infinitesimal shifting of expression which precedes deliberate action. He felt an abrupt silence go up and down the street. The town was waiting for a man, or perhaps two men, to die. Then, in a few minutes, it would forget, and continue with its pleasures.

As Barstow waited, nerves drawn out thin, muscles cocked precariously at hair trigger, he saw Bo Hart hesitate. Afterward the shadow of that thought crossed

Bo's face, and his hands clenched with rage.

"The boys'd gut-shoot me if'n I hogged their share of this pleasure," he rasped.

There was no fear in this man—only that deep hatred which fought all reason. For another moment he stood there, silently daring Flint to make a move that would give him an excuse to go for his guns. Then he spun about and stalked down the street.

With an audible breath the town stirred itself and took up where it had left off. Men crowded again onto the hotel porch, or went back to their drinks, or their games, or their dancing girls, eager to drain the most from every minute of life before they, too, were called to stare into Death's bony face.

FLINT edged through the loungers and went to his room. There was no running away now, even if he wanted to. Bo Hart would watch his every move until the others arrived. Dressed with his usual care in black serge, white silk shirt, and tooled leather boots, Flint left the hotel and crossed to the Blue Moon. The boy was waiting for him.

"For a spell it seemed that lesson two was all that I'd get," he said without inflection.

"I've made arrangements for Hillard to return your money if I'm not around to finish my end of the bargain," Flint said. "You needn't fret—"

"It wasn't that," the boy cut in. "I—I just wondered why you stay to face such odds."

"Sometimes a man wonders himself why he does certain things."

But Flint's spirits were lifted by the knowledge that the boy did not rate him a dishonest man. And, for a moment, he was caught up in his dream again. Ever since he had seen the wild, spring-fed valley down in the Llano country he had known what he wanted. They might have built

a great cattle kingdom down there, he and the boy—if only things had panned out differently.

But Flint's lips tightened, and he dealt. Fate had cast upon him the vengeance of the Harts. He had, at most, a few hours to live. And he remembered how, twice, the boy had been in a position to halt a direct threat to his life—and had only looked on unmoving, indifferent.

As they played, Flint glanced about him. The saloon was almost deserted. No one wanted to be caught in the cross fire of a sudden lead barrage. Hillard came from his office with blanched cheeks and evasive eyes.

"I got that indigestion again," he complained weakly. "Guess I'll turn in early."

Flint nodded. "Sure. I'll lock up."

Hillard, he knew, would help a friend if it didn't cost him too much, but the thought of facing the Hart gang left him cold and frightened and a little ashamed of those emotions.

"It might be a good idea for you to stop your gambling education with this lesson," Flint suggested to the boy. "I'm poison company to be near."

The boy spread his hands despairingly. "I've done nothing to the Harts. They want nothing from me."

Deep inside of Flint was a growing urge to guard this boy from harm, a cold fear that something might happen to him.

"When the Harts begin slingin' lead," he said softly, "they're not too particular about what gets in their way."

"I can look out for myself."

Flint let it go at that. The wide, silent breach kept him distant, impersonal.

When he left the saloon he caught the pungent aroma of cigarette smoke drifting along the currents of early morning air. He saw two shadowy forms standing straight and motionless near the stable. Another Hart had arrived.

The next morning Flint walked the length of the street as usual and was drawn

into Morrison's General Store with the decision that he needed a new tie. But he knew that he was making an excuse to himself. He had seen the boy enter the building.

"A tie," he said as Joe Morrison limped forward, "one of those black ones."

He saw the boy at the end of the counter, beside young Gail Morrison. Then Joe was talking, trouble and deep concern in his words.

"Flint—I—when Gail and me come to this place flat broke, you staked us without question. Told me to pay back when I could. I—I'd consider it an honor to help you if you ever get in a tight."

A slow smile touched Flint's lips. Old Morrison knew, as all the town knew, what was about to happen to Flint Barstow. The honest old shopkeeper was offering to side him in a gun battle against the Harts.

Flint said slowly, "There's some things a man has to work out for himself. You forget that loan."

Morrison shook his head. "It's an honest debt. Don't you have kin somewhere?"

By the quietness of the building Flint knew that the boy was overhearing this conversation. He smiled dryly and made his bid. "I had a son once. I don't know whether I still have or not."

He waited the moment out, but the boy remained at the end of the counter, neither speaking nor making any move of recognition. Flint went out, feeling empty and apart.

FOR hours that night he sat alone in the Blue Moon, feeling the strain and tension of the past three days drag at his nerves, knowing that the climax would come before another dawn. Then the boy came through the doors and pulled out a chair.

Again the thought tugged at Flint. Why was the boy hanging around when everyone else had cleared out? What other reason could there be except the pull of a

blood bond? Suddenly Flint knew that he could not let this boy be caught in the merciless blast of Hart gunfire. It was the only thing, the last thing he could do for his son.

"Well, I'm ready—" the boy began.

"Get out of here!" Flint clipped. "Get out before—" He never finished that sentence.

There was a sudden pound of boots, a splintering crash of wood, and four tall, short-lipped men were inside the room. They came with guns drawn. They gave Flint Barstow not even a fighting chance.

"That's him," Bo Hart barked. "The old one."

They spread out, guns weaving as Flint and the boy rose. Flint looked at the brothers; clannish, vindictive killers. There was Bo, with the white scar along his face. There was Slaggard, two fingers gone from his left hand. The sheriff who shot off those fingers during a bank robbery had been found one morning a week later with six holes through his back.

Mort crouched next in line, his body twisted a little to accommodate a shortened leg. It was said that the bullet which crippled that leg cost the lives of three Montana cowboys. Last was Rube, his big frame caked with the sweat and dust of hard riding, his little, close-set eyes gleaming viciously.

"What're we waitin' on?" Slaggard asked.

"Dyin' sudden is too easy for this damned hombre," Rube snarled. "He killed Slim. He'll pay plenty afore I'm through with him. You a friend of his?" he demanded of the boy.

"Friend?" the boy laughed harshly, a strained tightness in his voice. "Say, I been waitin' three days to see this happen." Casually he moved to one side.

A black wall of futility hit Flint, leaving him numb and almost sick. So that was why the boy had hung around, heedless of his own safety! He had wanted

this to happen, had waited for it! Well, it didn't make much difference now. In a few seconds the muzzles of four pairs of guns would begin spouting flame and death.

"Get a rope, Bo," Rube ordered. "We'll tie the damned tinhorn to the wall and practice up with our smokepoles. Slag, fetch some liquor from that bar."

Flint balanced his weight forward on the balls of his feet. His hand moved ever so slightly toward his holster. He would never give them the chance to torture him, to shoot him through the middle, and finish him off in fiendish butchery.

"Just a minute, Bo." The boy's voice cut in sharp and clear. There was something in it that made them all look around. "You don't want any rope."

An angry scowl spread over Rube's face. "Listen, button, yuh know what you're askin' for?"

"I'm not askin'. I'm tellin'. You don't want any rope." The boy turned slowly sideways, his head pulled down a little, his hands edging toward low-swung holsters.

Of one accord the guns swung from Flint toward the boy. But before they had half completed that short arc, the boy exploded. "Let's take 'em dad," he yelled. He was in mid-air, driving straight at Rube, whipping up his guns.

FOR a fraction of a second Flint remained motionless, held by the sudden change of events. The boy had called him *dad*! The boy was drawing that deadly gunfire from him to give him a chance! Then the thundering blast of gunfire snapped Flint Barstow into action. He saw his son collapse in mid-air and hit Rube Hart across the knees.

It seemed to Flint that he was an age getting his gun up, but he knew it was the fastest draw he had ever made. Twice his .45 jumped. Bo and Slaggard went down, as though slapped over by some great iron paw.

As a bullet rugged at his sleeve, Flint saw the boy struggling weakly, desperately to ward off Rube Hart's point-blank shots. From the corner of his eye he saw Mort, over near the bar, wildly thumbing with both hands. Another bullet cut a furrow through Flint's hair as he took deliberate aim and saw his shot bowl Rube over sideways. Three of the four Harts were down.

Then something big and hard and paralyzing hit Flint's side, knocked out his breath, slammed him backward against the wall. He tried desperately to lift his gun arm toward Mort.

A vicious grin twisted Mort's face as he leveled his iron. And suddenly Flint knew that he wanted more than he had ever wanted anything else in his life to live, to work with his son. He wanted to spend his life making up for those empty years.

But Mort Hart was already pressing down on the triggers which would take that from him. There was a movement on the floor, then, as the boy twisted, whipped up his gun. A single shot rang out. Mort Hart went suddenly backward. The death grip of his hands sent twin holes through the ceiling of the Blue Moon.

Flint felt some of the numbness go from his side, and shoved himself away from the wall. "You hurt bad, son," he asked.

The boy pulled onto one leg. "No. Just a busted leg and a coupla burns."

Flint looked at him steadily, searchingly. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "You didn't have a chance in a thousand."

"No," the boy said slowly, thoughtfully, "maybe not. But when that gang come in, I remembered the first lesson you gave me. 'Never bet, 'less you got better than an even chance to win,' you said. 'Figure the pot against the size of the bet an' your chances of winnin'. I—I was just a little long figuring the pot.'"

A slow smile touched Flint Barstow's lips. "You reckon it's all right for a man to drink with his son?" he asked softly.

"Why not?"

Blue-gray eyes met hard blue eyes, and there was no sign of emotion in either. It was a harsh, relentless land and a hard, rough-shod existence, and any show of emotion was a weakness. But in those casual words Flint Barstow knew there was sealed a bond and an understanding which weaker men can never know.



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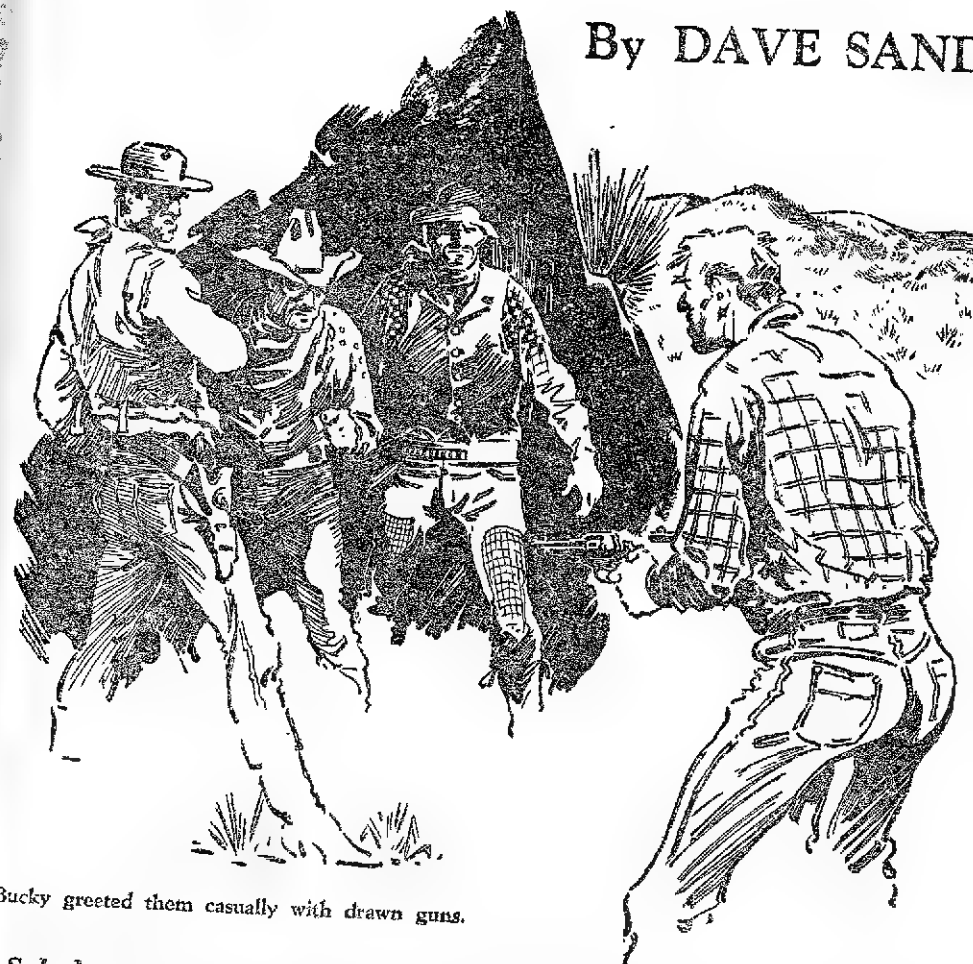
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THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE

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By DAVE SANDS



Bucky greeted them casually with drawn guns.

Scholar, gambler, fighting fool, Bucky O'Neill went hunting adventure in Arizona, and found it—with a law book in one hand and a lightning-quick sixgun always close to the other!

LAWMAN, GAMBLER, FIGHTING MAN!

GRADERS on the Sante Fe Railway drove some Arizona Navajo Indians from their spring, taking it for themselves Navajo sheep dropped dead of thirst. The Indians complained. They were ignored.

A dark, smiling, sinewy youth rode into their camp. Brown eyes sparked with anger as the Indians told him their troubles.

Without waiting for help from the law, the youngster turned his horse toward the graders' encampment. Arriving there, he informed the large Irish foreman that the spring would have to be restored to its rightful owners.

Eying the smiling stripling up and down, the Irishman guffawed. The youth was told to go home to his mother.

Without raising his voice, but speaking with a ring of tempered steel, the young man retorted, "By God, you'll give 'em back their spring!"

"Make us," laughed the huge foreman.

Turning quickly, the youth galloped away. In a short time he was back, behind him a group of armed Indians. With flashing eyes and steely tone, the stripling ordered the graders off the property and pronto! In spite of his fighting virtues, the brawny foreman backed down as he eyed the grim crew. The graders got!

The youth was Bucky O'Neill, adventurer, scholar, politician and soldier, the most lovable and versatile of Western heroes. He became the knight-errant of the Old West, ready to fight for the weak and downtrodden, the poor and oppressed, at the drop of a hat.

Bucky was born William O'Neill in St. Louis, Mo., the son of a distinguished Civil War hero. After graduating from college in the class of '79, he fell under the lure of the West, drifting into Phoenix, Arizona.

Establishing himself as a newspaper man, Bucky soon found himself editor and manager of the *Herald*. After a while this became too tame for him, and he drifted on to the mining country of Tombstone, still working as a newspaper reporter.

Later he took up the practice of law and became court stenographer. But before long he was on the move again. Everywhere he went he was well liked. In Yavapai County, Arizona, he was so popular that at one time or another he filled all the important political offices.

He again clashed with railroad interests. This time, however, it was with those in high places.

Running for sheriff, he had declared his intention of assessing railroad land to its full value. In order to fight Bucky, the company rushed in section crews from all around to vote against him. Despite these tactics, Bucky won—hands down.

Soon after he was elected, a train robbery

occurred at Canyon Diablo, situated in a wild, tough country. Taking with him Tom Horn, one of the West's finest trackers, Bucky galloped in pursuit of the bandits. Caught in an ambush, Bucky and his gallant followers charged the outlaws, killing one in a desperate gunfight. The rest escaped.

After weeks of pursuit, Bucky, on a powerful buckskin horse, impatiently lunged far ahead of the others. In a small canyon he surprised the band of robbers, who were confident that the sheriff had been shaken. Bucky greeted them casually with drawn guns. Their fingers itched for the trigger, but Bucky's reputation had traveled far and wide. At gun's point, he held them there an hour or more, until the rest of his posse rode up.

Another time Bucky chased a culprit across the Border, in a running gun battle. One of Bucky's shots went home, and he had to carry his wounded prisoner to the nearest village. A crowd of the prisoner's friends surged about the building in which captor and captive rested. Egged on by the captive, the boiling crowd stormed the place.

Bucky tried to assure them that the prisoner would get a fair trial—and warned them he would shoot the first man to set foot on the doorstep. They halted their attack, and someone sent a wire to Prescott, inquiring into Bucky's word-keeping ability. In less than an hour Bucky was on his way with his prisoner.

BUCKY could lose a bet like the best gambler. He always gambled for the highest possible stakes. Plunging, in the faro and roulette houses of Arizona, this cultured gentleman and dare-devil gunman won a name with his wild, reckless betting. With his life at stake, Bucky would have bet on his chances with the devil himself!

All his life, Bucky was afraid of women, yet he was their staunchest defender.

At one time his influence passed a bill through the legislature giving women owning property the right to vote at bond elections.

He was extremely bashful in the presence of women. Once, when he was a judge, a couple came to him to be married. Embarrassed and panicky at the thought of having to kiss the bride, he married them without a ring.

Yet, when danger lay in the offing, Bucky's mind worked like chain lightning. His courage knew no bounds!

In Phoenix the Hardy gang sent word that they were going to shoot up the town. Hearing of the coming attack, Bucky volunteered his services as deputy. The outlaws swooped into town, sixshooters and Winchesters blasting into the sky.

Stepping out in front of the onrushing gang, Bucky calmly ordered them to stop. Not waiting to slow down, the leader, Hardy, fired at Bucky. A second later Hardy hit the ground, felled by Bucky's unerring aim. Almost apologizing, Bucky walked up to him and in his soft-spoken drawl said, "Didn't I say you'd better stop?"

Bucky would give away anything he owned to a friend in need. On a certain occasion he drew \$300 from his bank in Prescott in order to pay off a debt at one of the town's stores. On the way there he was stopped two or three times to hear hard-luck stories. When he reached the store, not a cent was left in his pockets. He had given it all away to those who he thought needed it more than he.

FOR a number of years, Bucky was a leader in politics. He was recognized as the highest type of politician, wholeheartedly for the public in everything he did. The public knew Bucky for a big-hearted, prodigal, romantic, hard-fighting, devil-may-care friend—and loved him for it.

Going to a political gathering in Mam-

moth, the stage on which he was riding came to a raging stream, swollen by heavy floods. When the stage driver asked him if he wanted to turn back, Bucky said he was headed for Mammoth to give a speech, and to Mammoth he would go, river or no river. He spoke that night, but nearly drowned in order to do it.

Bucky's peculiar temperament was responsible for his failure as a soldier on one occasion. As lieutenant of the Prescott militia, he was called out to guard a public hanging. He lined up with the rest of his troop around the wooden scaffold. When the trap was sprung, an officer flopped to the ground in a dead faint. It was Bucky! His stomach had turned at the sight of a man being killed without a chance to fight for his life!

Theodore Roosevelt once declared that it was an inspiration to fight at the side of Bucky O'Neill. And he should have known. Bucky is said to have been the first volunteer to enlist for service in the Spanish-American War. He won a commission with the Rough Riders.

One day in the midst of heavy fighting, Bucky and his men were lying prone in a trench, as enemy bullets whined about them. Bucky, unconcerned as ever in the face of danger, was reciting Whitman's poem "Captain, My Captain" for the benefit of the weak-livered.

He stood up to converse with the captain of artillery. His followers pleaded with him to cover up in the trench. Amid a barrage of screaming lead, he threw back his head and laughed, replying, "The Spanish bullet hasn't been moulded that can kill me. . . ." Next moment, Bucky O'Neill dropped dead!

Arizona never forgot her fighting son. Today, in Prescott, on the square, you can see a bronze statue of a man mounted on a horse. The rider is Bucky, and the statue was erected to the glory of the bravest of the Rough Riders who fought in Cuba. . .

Whizzer Rides To War!

A fresh, headstrong kid saved young Boss Harrison's life, one feud-flaring day in Mesquite Bluffs . . . and insisted on payment in full—to the last drop of his own fighting blood!

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

YOUNG Boss Harrison stepped out of Bentley's law office and turned down the street for his horse. He halted, with his gaze holding upon the knot of men gathered around a saloon front. Their eyes held upon him, too. Bentley had followed his client to the door and stood there watching.

"Ree Girtman is with them, Boss," muttered the lawyer. "He's the one to look out for. Rest are just hoping to see a

fight. They're a bunch of yellow dogs."

"And me without any gun," said the tall, blond Harrison. "My daddy, old Boss, told me I was crazy for not wearing one to town. Well, I won't cross the street to dodge Ree, and if I get close enough to lay my hands on the man—"

He let the sentence hang and went on. His boots clattered in slow, even rhythm on the warped board sidewalk. Girtman, the Q foreman, was forty, dark and thickly



The entire universe, it seemed, exploded then.

built. His eyes were like glittering black ice, as he stepped out to face Harrison. Half a dozen yards separated the two men.

"Any jigger that would fight a woman," spat Ree Girtman, "ain't no good. I see you're afraid to carry your Colt, Harrison. you young yellow-belly!"

Still that even rhythm of boot-heels striking the sun-warped boards. Then Boss Harrison's left fist shot out and drove Girtman backward to a fall. Ree, in the grip of insensate rage, sat up swiftly and jerked out his staghorn-handled sixgun. Harrison ducked as the long barrel lined up on him but he'd have been too late had the weapon exploded.

The big Colt did not explode because a stone, half the size of a man's fist, had smacked Girtman hard between the eyes. Ree collapsed as though a cannonball had struck him, and lay still. Harrison faced quickly left to see a slim, youthful stranger, dressed in a divers assortment of rags, and wearing a very old sixshooter far back on his hip as though to have it out of the way.

"Thanks, kid," said Harrison.

"Keep the change." The kid gave him an odd, cold grin. He was not older than eighteen.

The billygoat-bearded Mesquite Bluffs doctor had seen, and now was bending over the Q foreman. Boss Harrison walked to the gun that Ree Girtman had dropped, picked it up and tossed it into the weeds of a vacant lot. The ragged stranger followed him.

"Always do your scrapping that way, with rocks?" Boss asked.

"Heap o' the time, anyhow," the youth answered soberly. His voice was thin and sharp. "Rocks is a sight cheaper'n cartridges. I wasn't let have a gun till I was eight or nine year old, mister, and by that time I could kill a runnin' jackrabbit with a rock. Allus keep a couple in my pockets fer jist sech things as this. Say, feller, listen. Saved yer life, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did," readily admitted Harrison. "I'll fix it with you."

"You'd ort to," the other said. "You was p'inted out to me as bein' plenty rich. Own the big Runnin' H cow outfit, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. That is, my daddy and I own it. Who are you, kid?"

"I got two names," said the scrawny unknown, a little cockily. "Jettie Bodine is one. T'other is Whizzer—my rock-throwin', y'see. I'm from the Hell's Thousand Acre side o' Little Bitter Run."

Somebody seemed to think that was funny, and laughed. The Whizzer fished a stone from a pocket in his rags, and there was no more laughter. The doctor announced that Girtman would be all right, though he'd be woozy for a while. A sheriff's deputy, just arrived, collected information and cut a hard eye at Jettie Bodine. Boss Harrison beckoned to the youth and, together, they walked up the street and into the biggest general store.

Boss put the Whizzer into good new clothing from tri-color cowboy boots to pearl-gray Stetson hat. "Square us, kid?"

Bodine had pale eyes. One narrowed. "Bout sixty dollars. That all yer life was wuth? Ort to have a new gun and belt to go with these clo'es."

He got them. Then: "How 'bout a job on yer range, feller?"

"Buena," said Harrison, brows puckered slightly. "Let's go."

FATE was busy in the Mesquite Bluffs section that afternoon. The young cattleman and his dressed-up companion had just stepped from the store to the street when the owner of the Q ranch rode into town. Harrison switched an eye to the scene of near-tragedy, saw nobody, looked back to the girl.

"Like for you to go to Lawyer Bentley's office with me, Nan. Maybe he can explain something to you that I couldn't."

The girl had reined her chestnut gelding

to a halt. Her clear, topaz-brown eyes pinned Harrison as though he were an ant of some new, queer variety. Whizzer Bodine broke out: "Gossamighty, what a purty gal!" She did not seem to hear.

"My name to you, Boss," she said, "is not 'Nan.' To you I am Miss Naneen Theodosia McQueen. I have some business in this store. If you'll bring the lawyer, I'll hear what he has to say."

Harrison brought the lawyer

"Ma'am," began old Bentley, as Miss Naneen Theodosia McQueen considered three bolts of tan silk goods on the counter, "I'll be as brief as possible. Coming from the Montana horse country to the cow country here, setting up on the ranch you inherited from an uncle, you'd be bound to get sort of tangled up in the new ways of things. Here we have some laws that are understood but not written, which in the long run work out for the best. Well, the creek that waters your Q range—"

"This," said Miss McQueen to the storekeeper, indicating one of the silken bolts, "is too light in color. If it faded—"

"The creek comes on down the valley," pursued the lawyer, "and waters the Harrison Running H range. In dry seasons such as this, if you irrigate that sod-buster project you have on the side, ma'am, it means that about half the Harrison herds must be sold."

"This other material," the girl was saying, "is a little too dark."

"Must be sold to keep them from famishing," old Bentley went on determinedly. "And the beef market is so low that the hide is worth more than the meat. Ma'am, you don't *have* to give up your sod-buster irrigation project, I guess, but it would be a fine, neighborly gesture. Eh?"

Naneen Theodosia McQueen turned up on him as though she had only that second become aware of his presence. Harrison winked at Jettie Bodine, a hard wink that said plainly, "Beat this if you can!"

"Boss," the girl said, "you told me all that I was so mad at your dad and that smart cowboy of yours, Yip Sneed, that I didn't bother telling you what I could have told you. I'll tell you now

"When old Gramps and I came down here and took over the Q ranch, we heard right away about you and your dad running things in the valley. I bristled at that, I'll admit. But I wouldn't have put in the sod-buster project if I'd known there was a dry season ahead. Old Boss Harrison didn't know about the dry season when he rode to Q headquarters and read the well-known riot act to Gramps. He just wanted to show how big he was.

"Yip Sneed," she proceeded, "was there with your dad. Old Boss and my grandfather each had a hand close to a gun when Ree Girtman rode up. Sneed jerked around in his saddle with his gun out, and shot. Claimed the hammer slipped. Accident or no accident, it was a fool thing to do, and the bullet went into a corral and killed the best horse I've ever seen, a bright sorrel with two blazes in his face. Coming down to brass tacks, Mister Harrison, you might say that what I'm doing is in memory of Blazes. It's funny, but that's the way I'm built."

"I—didn't know about the sorrel," muttered young Boss. They hadn't told him that. "Well, I guess there's nothing more to talk about."

"I guess there isn't," Naneen Theodosia McQueen replied coolly, turning back to the storekeeper. "I'll take three yards of this medium tan."

Harrison and Jettie Bodine went to the street, Bodine kicked two small stones from the dust and pocketed them. They got their horses and rode northward out of town.

When they were halfway to the Running H, the Whizzer said, "Feller, that gal sure is built purty and neat."

"So," young Boss observed, "is a hornet."

THE Harrison ranch buildings stood in a wide elbow of the cottonwood-lined creek, which was dry now, except for half-stagnant pools here and there. The two riders stepped from their saddles and dropped rein at the gallery steps of the big house. A tall, gaunt, full-bearded man with rock-hard gray eyes came stalking from the living room.

"Who's that with you, son?" he asked

"New rider I'm taking on. Dad, you might have told me about that Q sorrel. Offer to pay for it?"

"Sure ort to paid fer the hawss," put in Whizzer.

Old Boss ignored the impudence. "Gramps McQueen had just said I was a hog, and I was powerful mad. The wonder is that Yip got me away from there without a gun scrimmage."

"Sure ort to paid fer that sorrel," repeated Jettie Bodine.

Both Harrisons jerked around, facing him. Young Boss said, "Kid, we might be able to get along without your advice, in a pinch. Take my nag and yours around to the back. Bunkhouse cook will show you a bunk. Other boys'll be drifting in soon, and a few of 'em are tough hombres, so don't do anything that would start a rumpus."

"Like I was scared of a rumpus!" Boldly Bodine showed his teeth. "Which pa'ticklar ones is the dangerousest?"

"Yip Sneed and a figger who calls him self Durango. Yip is short and red. Durango is tall and dark. You'll know 'em when you see 'em. You can get a scrap out of either twice as quick as you can get it out of a wildcat. But say your prayers first."

The Whizzer laughed and went, leading both horses. Old Boss wanted to know all about the young stranger, and young Boss told him. They sat down on the gallery steps, each with long thoughts in his head.

Presently the younger Harrison drawled, "Maybe we've been a little too rough with

Nan McQueen, dad. It's too bad that we don't both know more about the way a woman figures things." He was an only child, his mother had passed when he was seven, and no other woman ever had lived under that roof. "The Q sorrel," he continued, "had more than just ordinary horse value to Nan. If we knew how much she'd expect, I'd take the money out of the safe and ride up there with it."

Old Boss had lifted his head and was staring down the lane that connected with the valley road. "Look what's coming," he muttered.

It was Miss Naneen Theodosia McQueen in the flesh

The girl was on her way home from Mesquite Bluffs. She drew rein within two rods of the pair. Her voice was level and business-like, but somehow musical in spite of that. "Here's a thing I should have mentioned when I saw you in town, young Mister Harrison. Cows of yours have been following the creek-bed up to better water and loafing on my range. I put a two-wire fence around my fields. Couldn't afford more wire. If your cows get into my green stuff, I'll sue you for damages."

"In memory of Blazes," quietly said Harrison, junior. "That sure is stuck deep in your craw. If your own cattle don't get through the fence, mine and dad's won't. What do we owe you for the sorrel?"

"But the Q cattle are kept on the upper range, away from the fields. As for the worth of the sorrel horse Yip Sneed killed, we'll take that matter up later."

Having delivered herself of this, Nan McQueen turned her mount and went riding away fast

"Smart," Old Boss said. "Holding the dead-horse business over, in case she needs it in a damage suit. It would smack a jury right in the eye, too."

They sat there in silence. The sun started burning a hole in the crest of the western hill range. Suddenly there was a hulla-balloo at the back—loud and angry talk, an

oath, and blast of a gun. The Harrisons leaped to their feet and went running

A DOZEN bareheaded cowboys were piling out of the bunkhouse into the dining room, heading toward the horse corral

Yip Sneed and Durango were sitting up in the dust near the corral gate, and their faces were bleeding. Durango held a smoking gun in his hand

Old Harrison barked. "What happened, boy?"

Sneed blinked at him, spoke to young Boss. "That danged stranger kid motioned me and Durango out from the supper table, and warned us not to make him any trouble—yeah, that kid! Then, like it's all settled, he starts gabbin' about Miss Nan McQueen bein' so purty, and asts where the Q ranch is, and says he's got a notion to go up there and ride for the Q. Well, I decides to put him in his place by haulin' him over my knee and blisterin' him, and he—uh, he—"

"Got loose and lammed you with a rock," supplied young Boss. "Same for Durango there. Durango shoots and misses—for a wonder. Where's the young'un now?"

"Throwin' rocks when he had a new Colt on his hip!" burst out Sneed, rising. "Where is he now? He jumped on your hawss and rode fast up the creek-bed in the sand, which is the reason you didn't hear hoofbeats. Headed for McQueen's. Wanted a fine hawss and saddle to go with his fine clothes, so's to cut some figger afore Miss Nan, don't you see?"

"Hawss thief," said the tall, dark Durango, also climbing to his feet. "Like for us to ride him down and drill him?"

Young Harrison now was thinking so hard along another line that he scarcely heard. Did the Whizzer know that he would run into Ree Girtman at McQueen's? If Ree saw him first, it would probably be just too bad for Jettie Bodine. This Q

foreman had a record along the owlhoot trails. More than once he had been tried for murder, but he had always managed to clear himself. It had been because he knew cows so well that old Gramps McQueen had prevailed upon his grand-daughter to hire Girtman.

Bodine's horse stood over beyond the corral. An ugly dun, it was, dish-faced and mean. Young Boss ran to the horse. The next second he was in the patchwork saddle and calling to his sire. "I'll see if I can't work up a horse-trade." He rode by the big house for his gun and belt.

Paying debts of whatsoever nature was a religion to this Harrison breed. Young Boss owed Jettie Bodine for his life, and he saw the opportunity to square it. To him, Bodine was as despicable as he was dangerous, but this made no difference in the matter of the debt.

When he had made a hundred yards northward across the range, the son of old Boss Harrison looked back to see every man at Running H headquarters grouped in front of the bunkhouse. He guessed then that something out of the ordinary was on foot.

Night fell and a full moon rose while he followed the creek into McQueen territory. He crossed the stream just below the irrigation ditch and dam. A little farther on he noted that the creek was at least half size. It held enough water for the herds of two ranches, easily. He looked back toward the dam with a hard half smile.

"In memory of Blazes." It was too bad, Sneed's shooting that pet sorrel horse. An accident, of course, but—Sneed had been foolish.

Lighted ranchhouse windows appeared ahead. Young Boss rode up to the hitch-rail in front, dismounted and tied the dun close to his own horse. The lights, he saw now, were in the kitchen and dining room. He walked around to an open dining room window, looked through—and gasped.

Whizzer Bodine was dining with the two

McQueens! Damned if the brat wasn't! The dressed-up young stranger was talking big: "And so I says to them Harrisons, I says, 'How much cash money do you want fer the whole outfit—buildin's, cows, hawsses, and everything?' And the old man, he says, 'Why,' says he, 'I wouldn't think o' 'ceptin' less'n forty thousand' Made me about half mad, ma'am."

Gramps McQueen, angular and spare, dim of eye and white-bearded, was being taken in. But Nan wasn't. A twinkle in her eye was eloquent. It was really funny. Bodine, who had ridden up here ostensibly for a range job because he had taken a fancy to the girl, now was trying, for that same reason, to pose as a man of wealth!

HARRISON stopped closer to the window, bared his head. The fast brightening moonlight glowed through his ruffled blond hair. He said, "Beg pardon, Miss Naneen. I'll out with what I've got to say, plain, because there may not be much time. Ree Girtman hasn't come back from town yet, has he?"

"Oh, yes," the girl said, pleasantly enough. It was like her to be hospitable to "strangers" within her gates. "In fact, he came back before I did—along back trails, maybe. I'll be plain, too. Ree was drinking and ugly, and I fired him, and he was madder than a blind rattlesnake when he left. Might not be much time, you said. What did you mean?"

"I was pretty sure that if Girtman found Bodine here, he'd probably kill him," Harrison said. "I can see you don't know about the ruckus that Ree and the kid and I had in town a little before you rode in. The kid knocked Girtman down with a rock—put him out cold—did it to save me. You can see now why I came up here."

Bodine laughed as though he were greatly amused. "A-skeered Girtman 'ud git me, huh? In a rock country? Boss, you air plumb locoed! What'd the Durango and Yip jiggers hafta say about me bustin' 'em

like I done?" He laughed very loudly. "Plenty, kid," was the ready answer. "Better watch out, next time you meet them. Durango, especially. He's not only a dead shot, but can throw a knife almost better than you can throw rocks."

The Whizzer must have felt that his dignity had been assailed, for he burst out. "Well, it ain't none o' your funeral, Boss, is it?"

Young Boss ignored that, and addressed the girl. "This place seems too quiet for a cow outfit's headquarters after supper. Likely, a big part of your crew is busy holding your cows on the upper range, but the others ought to be here, and cowboys make noise. Might be that Girtman—"

"Ree hates you," interrupted Nan McQueen. "Why?"

"My testimony in court came close to hanging him, few years ago. That's why. He's bad, ma'am. Hiring him for a range boss was poor business; firing him was worse. I've never paid much attention to your crew. Who picked 'em?"

"Ree, mostly," said Nan. "Gramps thought—"

"Wait!" Harrison cut in, jerking around, facing south. The night stillness had been broken by the distant sound of steel striking rock. The sound came again, and this time the girl's ears caught it.

"I understand!" she cried sharply, cuttingly. "You're up here to keep our attention while old Boss and the Running H range crew tears out our irrigation dam!"

Young Boss Harrison didn't even bother to deny that. He ran to the tie-rail at the front, and a moment later was astride his horse and galloping fast down the creek bank. He found eleven Running H boys digging like mad at the dam, under direction of old Boss.

"I've got a better plan, Dad!" He spoke in desperate haste. "Hop into saddles and come with me!"

He rode on across the almost dry creek-bed under the dam, and turned swiftly

northwestward in the moonlight. The others promptly left their project to follow him, and the earth resounded with the drumming of hoofs. Presently a slight figure on an ugly dun sped across the range from eastward, curving into the cavalcade at young Harrison's side.

"What the devil you doin' with my hawss?" angrily cried Whizzer. His face was flushed.

"Better go back, son," Harrison advised quietly. "This will be gun work, and your rocks won't count."

"The hell you say! I got—" Bodine broke off short. Then: "Skin me fer a polecat ef I didn't leave my new Colt back there layin' on the livin' room table! Showin' it to Gramps McQueen, y'know. But shucks, what I want with a gun, many rocks as they is? Where you fellers headin', anyhow? Shoot up a dance, or somepen?" Bodine's eyes bugged out as he got rid of the words.

Young Boss spoke loud enough so the others would hear, too. "McQueen cowboys are mostly Ree Girtman's pick, and none of 'em are there at headquarters. Girtman's just been fired and is gosh-awful mad. All Q cows are on the upper range, with a desert strip—where wind'll wipe out tracks in an hour—between the range and a hill pass that makes off toward an old trail leading straight into Mexico. Night is nearly as bright as day. Could anybody figure a sweeter setup for stealing a whole cow outfit at one move?" Young Harrison stopped speaking and laughed shortly.

Still riding hard, they crossed the desert strip to the foot of the rocky hill range, and turned northward to the mouth of the pass. The thunder of pony hoofs filled the night with ominous sounds.

THE dark and thickly-built Ree Girtman himself was one of the three point riders. On either flank of the big Q herd rode four other Q men, and more were behind,

driving. The moon was high when the point neared the rock-ribbed entrance to the pass.

Ahead of them, boulders began to talk, all saying, in effect, the same thing: "Halt and get 'em up, cow-thieves! Halt and get 'em up!"

The entire universe, it seemed, exploded then. The point riders sprang from their saddles and sought the slim cover of desert bushes. The men from flank and drag rode up, also dismounted and began to shoot from behind bush clumps. The cattle spooked, stampeded back toward the range. The Running H came from behind boulders, with guns still howling, in a concerted rush. Bodine was with them, every pocket crammed with rocks. He hurled the rocks with the speed of bullets, yelled and swore and twisted his body.

Fate was not mocked that night. A Q man rose from behind the dead body of Ree Girtman and was drawing a bead on young Boss Harrison when Jettie Bodine's last rock caught him at the base of the jaw and spoiled the shot. Young Boss saw it, and he downed the Q man, who fired at Bodine as he fell. It was the last shot the Q man ever fired.

On the afternoon of the next day, the Whizzer came to in a clean white Harrison bed. He heard somebody outside saying that the creek was running again. He opened his eyes and saw both McQueens and both Harrisons, and the Mesquite Bluffs doctor, standing at his bedside. Young Boss tried to smile but the attempt failed dismally.

He said hoarsely, "We won the fight, son." He was holding the girl's hand, and her eyes were wet.

"Yeah?" mumbled Bodine, and began to stare as though at something a thousand miles away. His lips seemed stiff. "Over there—a stranger. . . . Tall stranger in black. . . . Somebody—gimme—a rock. . . ." And that was all.



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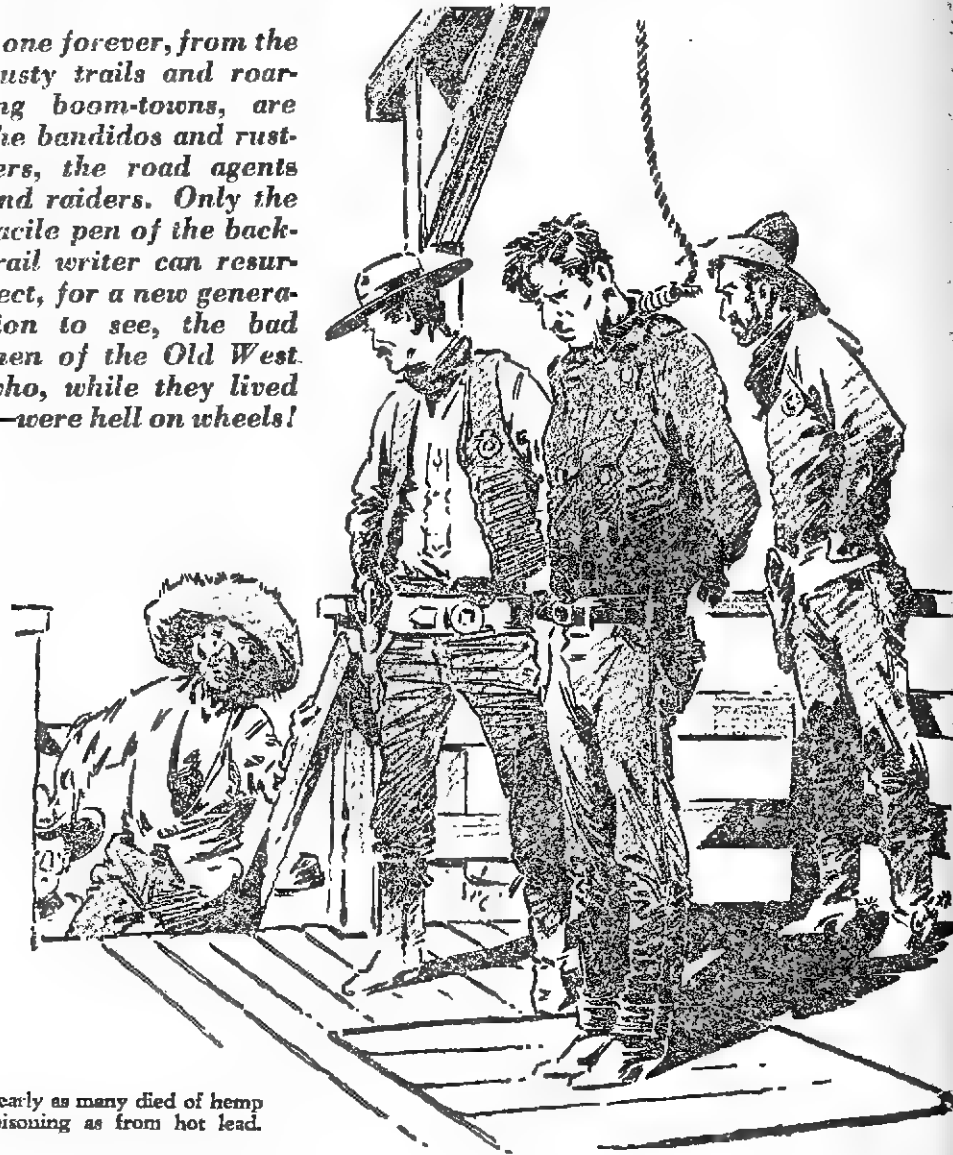
Horsemen of Damnation

By GRAHAM R. McMURRAY

VAST distances, scant population and primitive means of communication marked the Old West—an ideal setup for the man outside the law. With free range in every direction, and his loot having hoofs on which to travel, moving

stolen horses and cattle from a hot neighborhood to one less dangerous was a simple matter. Striking along about midnight, the rustler and his gang cut out those animals he had chosen and by sun-up were miles along the trail.

Gone forever, from the dusty trails and roaring boom-towns, are the bandidos and rustlers, the road agents and raiders. Only the facile pen of the back-trail writer can resurrect, for a new generation to see, the bad men of the Old West who, while they lived—were hell on wheels!



Nearly as many died of hemp poisoning as from hot lead.

Nighthawks (men who rode herd during the dark hours) usually were on duty, it is true, but often as not these guardians of the cattle were ambushed, dry-gulched (shot from an *arroyo*, stream-bed or other natural cover) or potted from a distance. In some cases, particularly when Indians were stealing, the unfortunate waddy was silently and neatly dispatched by slipping a noose over his nodding head.

Larger herds rated two or more nighthawks, but often it was a simple matter to slay one, or take him prisoner, so a rustler could ride the victim's horse to meet the other guardian of the herd. In the darkness it was impossible to tell friend or foe from a distance; by the time the cowboy had recognized the raider it was too late.

For your real rustler almost invariably was a vicious, ruthless killer—he had to be. Every man's hand was against him; he had no friends except those of his own ilk. Any mercy shown his victim would have served to make his position more precarious, for as soon as the prisoner was released he invariably would report the theft to his *caporal*, or boss of the ranch. From then on the rustler's life would depend upon his horse, his cunning and his luck.

Especially was this true in the case of horse thieves. When it is taken into consideration that to steal a man's mount deprived him of his only means of getting about in a wild and dangerous country—often his very existence depended upon his faithful pony—it is easy to see why the comparatively mild crime of horse theft drew such terrible penalty. Neck-tie parties were the one quick and sure way to put an end to the thief's depredations; indeed, nearly as many lads of the owl-hunt trail (bandits and thieves) died of hemp poisoning as from hot lead.

Many are prone to lump *all* outlaws under the general term of rustler. This is an error, for the bad men of the West prac-

ticed their nefarious trades in various ways. Rustler applies only to those individuals who made a specialty of rustling cattle, and oftentimes horses, belonging to honest ranchers; and they operated any number of schemes. The most common was to swoop down on a herd and cut out whatever animals were most desirable, and hurry them away to either a friendly 'station' in the same general neighborhood—where some pal operated a spread for just such stolen cattle—or else rush them along to market, many miles away. Some of the biggest herds in the country were founded upon such tactics. Suffering these losses, early day cattlemen sought a way to circumvent the depredations.

HENCE the brand. Once a man's brand was burned into a beef's hide, that animal was his personal property, and woe to any waddy who was caught trying to steal it! Such brands were registered at the county seat, much in the manner of a deed to real estate, and provided an easy means of checking on cattle. Brands were of all shapes and designs, the owner usually attempting to combine simplicity with a pattern not easily altered or blotted out by thieves.

The two types most favored were initials, usually those of the owner, and numbers; Lazy S and Seventy-six, for example. 'Lazy,' in this case, means a sprawling, irregular letter. Many of these insignia were of peculiar design; some bordered on the humorous. A number of ranchers in the country had the same brand, but never in the same community. Following is a list of brands, other than letters of the alphabet and numerals, popular in many sections. The names, of course, are taken from their character, or what they are intended to represent.

Bar-X, Seven-Up, Curry-Comb, Hog-Pen, Rocking-Chair, Doodle-Bug, Pothook, Porcupine, Booger F, Neck-Tie, Diamond

T (there are many variations of the diamond mark, the design not readily lending itself to change), Pup, Double Circle, Paddle, Flying V, innumerable 'Circles' and 'Triangles', Three L, Lucky Seven, Tadpole, Hashknife, Turkey-Track—the list is interminable. But any ranahan could get one glimpse of a cow and tell you just where she belonged, her age and the name of her owner.

One of the most famous brands was the XIT. This outfit held literally hundreds of thousands of acres of land, and its herds were almost uncountable. Seeking to find a brand that was not a duplicate of any then extant, and particularly desiring a design that could not easily be altered or blotted out, the owners told their foreman, old Barbecue Campbell, to fetch up one. Barbecue hunkered down and began tracing designs in the sand with a huge forefinger. Finally he arose. "There she is," he said.

Hence the XIT, one of the most widely-known cattle brands in the world.

Back to the rustler. The second type was the 'hit-and-run' operator. Generally he kept about two jumps ahead of an irate posse. His specialty was striking fast and hard, and hustling his 'takings' up the trail to market. As a rule, he did not mess with the average spread's cattle; he usually operated with his own gang and preyed upon the big drives on their way up the trail to Ogalla or Dodge City, Nebraska, or to Abilene, Kansas, to market. Often these huge herds numbered more than two thousand animals.

Jack Rustler and his boys would swoop down on the herd, generally in the middle of the night, and with blasting sixguns and Indian war-whoops, stampede the fear-crazed beeves. Scattering in every direction, a part of the cattle would be easy to round up and high-tailed up the trail. As often as not, if the gang outnumbered the cowboys, the former would murder those in charge of the herd and drive on

to market, representing themselves to be the original owners. Frequently they got away with it. Without modern means of communication, buyers were not informed of the true ownership, and simply bought what they saw. Nine times out of ten, they paid for it in gold.

WHICH brings us to the third of the owlhoot crew, the holdup artists and bandits. They were a braver and hardier crew than the first-named thieves. When a bunch of cattle had been sold and the foreman paid the purchase price in gold, he usually allowed his waddies to spend a day or two painting the town more or less red. After they had sobered up, he would collect them and head back home, taking the gold along. Free of the necessity of caring for a couple of thousand bellying charges, the cattle company men rode light and fast—and they all went armed.

To tackle an armed group of fighting men, intent on getting their boss' gold back to him was a job that required nerve and daring. These bandits as a rule depended upon the element of surprise, and many a bloody battle has been fought between the two groups. Any wounded or captured bandit received short shrift. Well did the bad man know it; hence he had to have cunning and the courage of desperation.

Road agents usually were lone wolves, specializing in 'histing' (holding up) stage-coaches and solitary travelers. Theirs was a short life and a merry one; generally they blew in their earnings as fast as they acquired them, the saloons and gambling hells getting most of it.

Raiders, like other wolves, hunted in packs; also like other wolves, they struck swiftly and fiercely, then were away with the wind. Use of the term developed from the Indian raiders who made horrible the nights of the full moon in the early days. Taking a tip from the savages, catt

thieves and their like adopted the same tactics, swooping down upon isolated ranches and making away with livestock and any valuables they might find.

As the raiders grew in numbers and boldness, so did their activities. State borders were favorite hunting-grounds for the thieving gentry. Large bands of these marauders would across one State line, raid a few ranches and even small towns, and speed back to their lairs. Overpowering any defenders by sheer weight of numbers and surprise, they flourished until a force sufficiently strong to track them to their hideaways and destroy them was assembled.

Contrary to tradition, there never were many actual renegades on the Western scene. Bad men, yes—but some inherent

pride of race, some inner sense of decency, prevented them from turning traitor to their kind. When a Westerner, either native or adopted, went bad, he turned to rustling cattle and robbery. The renegade idea gained prominence due to the fact that white men frequently were seen among maurauding Indian bands. As a rule, these were men who had been captured as children when some unfortunate settlement or emigrant wagon train was ambushed and the adults slain. Growing up with their captors, the youngsters absorbed their way of living.

Like the Indian and the buffalo, the gent with the sixgun and the handkerchief over his face has gradually faded into oblivion. But he was hell-on-wheels while he lived!

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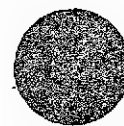
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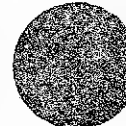
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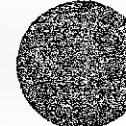
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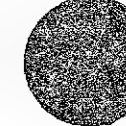
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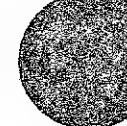
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Man-Tamer of Bushwhack Range

Chapter I

GUNS FOR FOUR

PETE WALLACE topped a little ridge and saw a man and a girl. The man was working on one of his horse's front shoes with a jack-knife.

Pete rode alongside, looked down, grinned. "Little trouble?" he suggested.

The nicest thing about Pete was his grin. It lighted a face that was a bit too lean and a bit too hard. When Pete grinned, women—and even a lot of men—decided he wasn't such a bad-looking jasper after all.

"Nothing much," the unmounted man said. "Chip of stone under the shoe." He dropped the hoof, pocketed the knife and swung into the saddle. "Hot, sort of," he

He pivoted in the saddle and snapped a shot at the first of the pursuing mob.

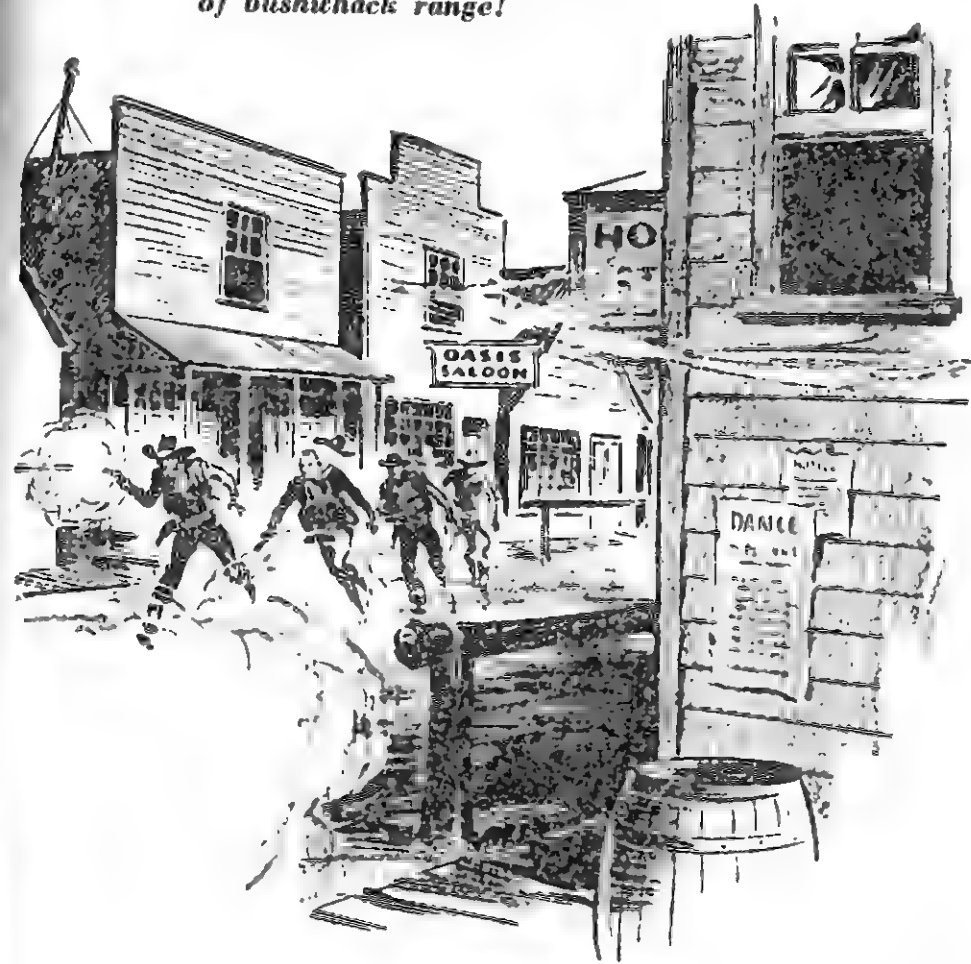


A short action-novel of a Wyoming range-tamer

By H. S. M. KEMP

Bushwhack Range

From the sink holes of Arizona to the lush Wyoming bottoms came Colt-swift Pete Wallace, strange drifter, who fought with brains and fists and guns to brand the outfit that employed him—a vassal to the rustler-killer king of bushwhack range!



remarked, as he, Pete and the girl kneeled their mounts forward.

Pete agreed, and wondered how far it might be to town.

"Couple miles," the man said. "Just on the other side of that hill, off there to the left. Buffalo City, if you're interested in the name."

"Names mean nothing to me," grinned Pete. "All I'm interested in is a job."

Riding along, the stranger discovered Pete's home-range was Arizona, but that Pete was tired of yellow sageland and gaunt-bellied cattle.

"She's dry," Pete said. "Drier than I've seen her for years. So I figured I'd hit

north, and see if things looked any better up here."

"Do they?" the man asked. The girl continued to ride in silence.

Pete waved to rolling green hills and greener cottonwoods along the creek. "Do they, mister! I'll tell the world!"

Pete's enthusiasm drew a smile from the other. He was Pete's own age of six-and-twenty, and his blunt features and stubborn jaw hardened when he spoke. "Sure," he agreed. "There ain't a better spot in all Wyoming. But that's the trouble. Some people want too much of it."

"Sorta crowding you, eh?"

"Crowding don't seem a strong enough word."

As they climbed, Pete said, "Looks like good water country."

"You can get as much water as you want—but it don't always come from a creek."

Pete understood. "Meaning wells and windmills," he said finally. "But that's considerable of a chore."

"And a chore," the girl put in tartly, "that some men try to get around."

PETE had already wondered if they were brother and sister. Now he was certain they were. She was fair and gray-eyed like the man, had the same short nose and a feminine counterpart of his stubborn chin.

"Yeah," Pete agreed. "Digging wells is a tough proposition. Me, I wouldn't want it."

She faced him. "Then to obtain creek-water, how far would you go? Would you burn up hay-land, destroy buildings, cut fences and stampede stock?"

Pete looked more closely. "Somebody doing all that?"

"Yes Myles Edwards is. Jack, here, and I really know."

"You don't savvy what Dot's driving at," Jack broke in. "This Myles Edwards bought the Circle M some years ago. He's a retired rancher living out on the Coast;

and when he took over the Circle M he didn't bother to find out if Cottonwood Creek was on his property or not. It wasn't. So when I fenced this place of mine, he was up against the windmill proposition."

"And that started a range war?" the man from Arizona asked quietly.

"You can't call it war," Dot said. "War is out in the open, and everyone has a fighting chance. Edwards' methods—or at least Big Ike's methods—are dirty and underhanded."

"Big Ike Bailey," the brother explained, "is the Circle M foreman. But that's okay. I was here ahead of Edwards and Bailey—and I'll be here long after they pull out!" he finished as they hit the main street of Buffalo City.

Pete had seen many cowtowns, all pretty much alike. They had come to him as rows of unpainted buildings in the midst of a shimmering desolation. Here, in Buffalo City, the buildings were equally unpainted; but the cool cottonwoods across the main drag and the gurgling creek nearby made the place look inviting.

Buffalo City, too, had a railroad. An engine, two passenger coaches and a string of cattle-cars snorted out of the station as the riders pussy-footed their mounts past the blacksmith shop and a saloon and pulled up at the general store.

As Pete swung from the saddle he saw two cowboys watching from the porch of the Oasis Saloon. Jack gave them a brief, hard glance, and his jaw tightened.

"Friends of yours?" grinned Pete.

"The kind you keep in front of you all the time," Jack said.

"Coming, Jack?" Dot called as she moved toward the store.

"Right away—after I've washed the sand out of my teeth," Jack said, and looked at Pete Wallace. "Guess you could stand a drink, too."

As Pete followed Jack into the Oasis he caught the apprehensive look the girl suddenly turned on her brother. Dot's eye

held more than apprehension. They held fear—and a strange yearning.

THE saloon was almost deserted. A bow-legged, hard-eyed, mustached cowpuncher stood at the bar and three other men dozed in chairs tipped back to the saloon's wall. As Pete and Jack belled up to the bar, the hard-eyed puncher moved as far away along the mahogany as possible. Jack's lips tightened at the action. They took their time drinking their beer. Jack finally drained his glass, then remarked he had to hustle along. "Dot and I've both got business to attend to," he explained. "But if you're goin' to eat, mebbe we'll find you at the Chink's."

"Sure," Wallace said. "I'll see you there."

Left alone, Pete looked around as the bow-legged puncher moved back to his former position at the bar. Twisting a whiskey-glass in his thick fingers, he looked at Wallace and asked harshly, "Workin' for Newton?"

"Talking to me?" Wallace's tone was very low.

"Yeah," grated Bow-legs. "I ast you if you was workin' for Jack Newton?"

"Any law against it?" Pete countered.

The other glared. "Dunno about that; but it ain't healthy. Not healthy—a-tall!"

"Ain't healthy, eh?" Wallace repeated. "Well, now you tell me what I'm supposed to do. Act spooky or somep'n?"

Pete expected a move and had hooked his elbows back on the bar when the two hands who had been sitting on the porch pushed in. They walked up to Bow-legs, flanked him.

Both were in their early twenties, one dark-haired, the other blond. Twins, Pete told himself, and looked from one to the other.

They stared insolently back at him. One spoke to Bow-legs. "Trouble, Cheyenne?"

Cheyenne kept his eyes on Pete. He chewed on his ragged mustache. Then:

"Ain't no trouble here," he allowed. "All I'm doin' is spreadin' this hombre a hand. I'm tellin' him it ain't healthy to work for Jack Newton."

The twins looked curiously at Pete. The dark-haired one gave a brittle laugh. "Ain't healthy?" he almost snarled. "Why, it's plumb suicide!"

Cheyenne smiled wolfishly, said, "And he don't look like no suicide candidate—not like a ranny who'd want to cash in fer no reason a-tall!"

Wallace could take as much hoorawing as the next man; but not of the sort these whippoorwills were handing him. The three were armed and honing for trouble. And the only way Pete knew how to handle trouble was to meet it halfway.

His hand snapped down from the bar-top and when it blinked up again Cheyenne and the twins were gazing into the nasty-looking hole in a Colt .45.

Wallace grinned. "Lots of fun, eh, gents?" he rasped. "Lots of fun. Sure. And now we'll have some more fun—and we'll play the game my way!"

The twins weren't laughing now; and Cheyenne's face had turned a dull red. Slowly, three pairs of hands went shoulder-high.

Pete waited. There was no sound in the saloon, but he knew that the sleepers in the chairs had come to life and were hanging on his next move. Deliberately, he shoved the gun back into its holster, then spoke.

"Let 'em down," Wallace said and his eyes were very cold. "I'll take the chance." When they obeyed, he went on. "Me," he admitted, "I'm not so good thinkin' up smart answers. Short of brains, I guess. But if any of you three—or all of you three—figure you'd like to make a fool outa me some other way, fill your hands—and fill 'em quick!"

Tensely he waited. A grin came back to his face, but it didn't soften the harsh line of his jaw or the bleak look in his eyes.

The men he challenged stared. The twins looked foolish. Cheyenne, baffled rage showing all over him, wetted his lips, hesitated. The color mounted in his cheeks and his hand inched toward his gun. Then, as though thinking better of it, he let his hand slowly drop.

Chapter II

FISTS, BOOTS AND HELL

A CHAIR scraped and, from the corner of his eye, Pete saw a man get up and walk toward him. He was middle-aged, heavily-built, with a sweeping mustache and a rugged chin. He wore a star on his vest, and Wallace wondered which way the play would go now.

The sheriff grinned, slapped him on the shoulder, said, "Glad to know a gent with some sand in his craw. And you—" he rapped at the twins and Cheyenne—"it looks like yuh threw a loop and snarled up in it!"

"Nem'mind that old stuff," Cheyenne grated. "Any bones I got to pick with this hombre'll keep a while."

"And that goes for us!" broke in the blond twin.

The sheriff chuckled. "Cheyenne shoulda knowed better," he pointed out. "He's got his growth, and he's been around. But you two yearlin's—well, gun-slingin's a man's game. You'd best not try it till you're dry behind the ears."

The pair colored, began a hot retort. The sheriff's good-nature fled. "Button yuhr lip!" he told them bluntly. "Yuh're lucky the feller didn't blow a hole in yuh! Now vamoose, or I'll throw the three of yuh in the jug!"

They cleared out, Cheyenne with them.

The sheriff turned to Pete. "If you mentioned yore name, I didn't get it."

Pete said, "Pete Wallace."

"I'll buy a drink, Pete Wallace. Folks call me Joe Cross."

When the barkeep had served them Cross said to Wallace, "The kids ain't bad, 'cept they think they're tough. Nor's Cheyenne—now 'n ag'in. They're off the Circle M, the Edwards spread, fourteen miles outa town."

"I met the Newtons," Wallace said. "They mentioned Edwards."

Cross nodded. "There's trouble hatchin' between the two outfits. Jack Newton claims Ike Bailey is raisin' hob with his fences and sech-like, and Ike Bailey claims Jack's rustlin' Circle M cows. Me, I don't believe Jack's a rustler, and I don't altogether believe all that Jack says about Ike. If I *did* believe it, I'd pin Ike Bailey's ears back in a hurry and dehorn him some."

"How big an outfit is this Newton's?" Wallace asked.

"Yuh can't call it an outfit at all. Most times, there's just Jack and his sister, and a halfbreed kid named Manuel on the job. The Circle M's something else. They keep ten-twelve men at headquarters, and another half-dozen hands out at the line-camps."

Wallace said, "Ike Bailey boss?"

"Sure," Cross told him. "Old Myles Edwards was out just once, a year ago. Big Ike hires 'em and fires 'em to suit himself."

They talked on for some minutes, then Pete said he would push along and get something to eat.

"Stickin' around here?" the sheriff asked.

"Looking for a job."

"Then try the Circle M. They'll be startin' to ship any day now. When that happens, Big Ike takes on a few more hands."

PETE left the saloon, hit the New York Cafe and found Jack Newton and his sister at a table. They invited him to sit. He took a chair, gave the Chinaman his order, then found Dot studying him curiously.

He didn't understand it till Newton grinned, said, "Fifteen minutes in town—and startin' to build a rep!"

"Build a rep?" echoed Pete. "How come? Somebody been squealing on me?"

From the next table came a wheezy chuckle. Pete looked over, and found a ratty old cowboy wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yes, sir!" cackled the old-timer. "Slick-est thing I ever seen! Cheyenne figured he'd caught him a suckin' dove. What he got ahold of was a porkypine with his quills on fire!"

Pete had a hazy recollection of seeing the cowhand in the saloon. The talkative old fool must have slipped out to spread the tidings while Pete was drinking with the sheriff. Pete grunted, mentioned a lot of talk about nothing, and made way for the soup the Chinaman was bringing on.

Newton said, "You pulled a fast one over Cheyenne Williams this time, but he won't forget about it. Cheyenne's bad when he's sober and worse when he's soused."

"Is, eh?" Pete observed carelessly. "And who were the cherubs siding him?"

"Curt and Ed Watling," Newton said. "They and Cheyenne are some of the Circle M outfit. If you're ridin' through, none of 'em matter. But if you're figurin' on stayin' a spell, don't overlook any bets where Cheyenne Williams is concerned."

"Thanks," Pete said. "Pass the crack-ers—and the sauce."

A shade of annoyance darkened Newton's face, but Dot laughed. "If you ever do meet 'em again," she said, "I rather hope I'll be there, Mister—"

"Pete Wallace Not Mister at all."

She nodded. "All right, Pete. I hope I'll be there to see the fun."

"Dunno about fun," Pete said. "Next time Cheyenne may be bolder—or a bit more full of booze."

The conversation turned to other matters. Newton suggested that if Pete had

nothing pressing on his hands he might care to run out to the JN spread.

"But there isn't much of a spread to it," Dot put in. "A couple of thousand acres and a few hundred head of stock. Still, it suits us. And if you feel like paying us a visit, we'll be glad to have you."

Pete thanked them both, but said the location of a job was his first chore. "Still," he added, "if I locate a job around here, I'll be seeing you folks again."

The sun was sinking fast, when the Newtons pushed off for home. Pete, with nothing of importance to occupy him, turned into the Oasis and got into a poker game with Cross, two cowboys and a clerk from the general store.

The game ran along till midnight. Then Pete got up, cashed in and asked about a hotel. The sheriff told him that the "Stockman's" stood a block away, to the west.

Outside, the night was dark and windy. Cottonwoods swayed and whispered, and a sign over the blacksmith's shop squeaked like a rusty gate. Above the whisperings and the squeakings Wallace heard a man call his name. He stopped, turned—then something hit him over the head.

IT WAS almost a knockout blow. Pete went down, rolled off the sidewalk and automatically tried to cover up. He heard muffled voices; then men launched themselves at him. He got a kick in the ribs, another on the shoulder. As his head began to clear he struggled to his knees and grabbed a pair of legs. After that, it was a blur.

Later, he remembered crawling up and grabbing one of his assailants. With his other hand he tried to snatch his gun. He fumbled the gun; tried to defend himself with his fists.

It was a hopeless fight. He couldn't see his enemies clearly, although he knew there were three of them. He took a smash in the jaw, another in the mouth. He went down

(Continued on page 127)

Tougher Than Rattlesnakes

By LLOYD E. BARBER

GOLD! A hundred million dollars worth! Nuggets like peas, like marbles; as huge as a man's fist. "Gold is where you find it!" shouted the West. Bill Fairweather listened, and went seeking it. He craved tobacco money badly. What he found was pretty good for

tobacco money. Great buckets full of gleaming yellow ore. Enough to glut a treasury! Enough to ransom any king!

A reckless giant, Old Bill, as men called him, was one of the wildest of the wild men bred by wild towns and wild times. His long, flowing mop of hair, steer horn

Virginia City! Old Bill Fairweather, golden man of '63, was its darling. He founded it, nourished it, loved and hated it—then left it forever, to die alone, still seeking the yellow metal that had bought and sold his soul!



Old Bill raised the snakes high in the air, snapping their ugly heads.

mustache, and flaming beard marked him as he whirled, like a comet, through the history of Montana's Virginia City.

Old Bill was born in Woodstock Parish, New Brunswick, on June 14, 1836. Bitten by the bug of sudden wealth lying in wait beneath the boots of the gold-seeking Restless Ones, he wandered aimlessly throughout the West.

Somewhere in his wanderings, Old Bill miraculously discovered that rattlesnakes could not harm him. The diamondbacks in the Rockies never raised their vicious heads to strike in his presence. Why this was, no one ever learned. Nor did they ever discover if this strange, fiery-bearded Goliath was immune to the snake's deadly venom.

In Deer Lodge, Montana, Old Bill teamed up with five other searchers for elusive golden dust. The party of six—Harry Edgar, Barney Huges, Thomas Cover, William Sweeney, Henry Rodgers and Old Bill Fairweather toiled slowly over Tobacco Root Mountains to the upper Yellowstone River. Test holes and samplings were made, but no gold was discovered.

Two days after their arrival at the Yellowstone, a large band of Sioux Indians swooped down on them. Captured, they were marched to the Indian encampment. On the way, Old Bill deftly captured two big rattlesnakes, hiding them in his shirt. Squaws, old men, children and warriors gathered in pow-wow around their prisoners. Scalping and burning were discussed.

Just as the redskins were ready to pounce on their victims, Old Bill thrust a hand into his shirt. Out wriggled the two rattlers. The Sioux retreated in fear and awe. Old Bill raised the snakes high in the air, snapping their ugly heads until the air throbbed with the harsh sound of vibrating tails.

Thinking Old Bill sacred, a ritualistic dance was begun by the Indians around their holy bush. The white men partici-

pated. Old Bill soon tired of prancing about. He yanked up the sacred bush and, in the words of Harry Edgar's diary, "walloped the medicine man over the head with it!"

BACK to back, the six men lined up, waiting for their doom. The old chief held a council. It continued for twelve hours. But Old Bill's medicine had been too potent for the Sioux. They allowed his party to depart in peace.

Still sampling and test-holing for gold, they worked their way westward. But no gold in paying quantities turned up. Ragged, starving, with crippled horses, they decided to abandon the quest. They headed for Bannock, a hundred long miles away.

Pitching camp in a narrow, deep valley, May 26th, 1863, Old Bill looked for a place to stake the horses. Spying rimrock, he and Harry Edgar grabbed pick and shovel, went panning. Old Bill filled the pan to the brim with brown earth, in the hopes of finding enough money for tobacco. The very first pan yielded five dollars worth of yellow dust. Next day the entire party panned dirt.

Everywhere in the valley, pay dirt was uncovered. More gold than any of them had ever gazed upon before. Twelve claims were staked. The creek was christened Alder Gulch after the many alders growing on its banks.

The find was to be kept a secret. Old Bill and his five partners schemed to return and prospect the entire gulch, panning the finest deposits. No one would dream of the Eldorado they had stumbled upon.

But the day after their arrival in Bannock their secret was out. It spread like wildfire. Huge crowds tagged the footsteps of Old Bill and his friends wherever they went. Drove of gold-hungry prospectors followed them out of Bannock. A miners' meeting was called on June 4th at Beaverhead Rock. Old Bill harangued the crowd.

If his party's claims remained untouched, they would go on. If not, they would stay right where they were. A vote was cast to leave the claims alone.

At Alder Gulch Old Bill sang out the glad news that they had arrived at their destination. With a roar, the crowd surged ahead, milling and stampeding like cattle. Claims sprang up as fast as stakes could be hammered into the ground. In a week a town shot up beside the once peaceful creek. It was named, after heated altercations, Virginia City.

For ten miles along Alder Gulch other towns arose. All connected by one main street down which rode Old Bill Fairweather like a king among his minions. Gold to him became something to drain through his fingers like sand. It meant absolutely nothing. From one saloon, gambling house and honkytonk to another he traveled. Gambling was fast and furious. Flinging gold from an inexhaustible supply across gaming tables in wild frenzy, he would make a thousand dollar wager without flickering an eyelid.

A wealthy potentate, Old Bill tossed precious dust by the handfuls into the air as he dashed up and down. He bellowed with mirth as loafers, children and Chinamen scrambled madly in the oozing slime for his golden nuggets. He flung a fortune into the eager laps of the dancehall girls. He roared from one bar to another, leaving behind him a golden wake.

OLD BILL soon tired of the wealth so easily acquired. His indomitable spirit longed for new fields of endeavor. Fresh

adventure lured him onward. In 1868 he drifted away from sprawling, wicked Virginia City. While he had squandered his fortune into thin air, the town had grown to a raging inferno of 12,000 fighting, robbing, loving, gambling souls.

For four years Old Bill chased his golden dreams through lonely, isolated stretches of the Northwest. Always it was the search, never the gold that lured him on and on. Alone, he journeyed far up the Peace River in British Columbia, his eager eyes gazing ahead to the next digging. He reached southeastern Alaska. But never again was the bearded giant to stumble on such a treasure as Alder Gulch, nor found a second Virginia City.

Weary, broke, Old Bill returned to the district that bore his name. But now his golden glory had slipped away from him. No more was the thunder of his laughter heard as worshipful throngs banged heads to claw for his riches in black mud. Lower and lower he sank, drinking more liquor than was good for him.

On August 25, 1875, reduced to dire poverty and drunkenness, Old Bill passed away in Robbers' Roost, a lonely roadhouse in the Passamari Valley. Only two miles distance lay Alder Gulch, scene of his great discovery; Virginia City—city of the Golden King.

In his last delirious moments his huge hands opened and closed, flinging forth golden grains as of old. His flowing red mane lifted and fell as his lips moved in wild, mocking laughter. . . .

"Gold . . . gold!" he mumbled as he died.

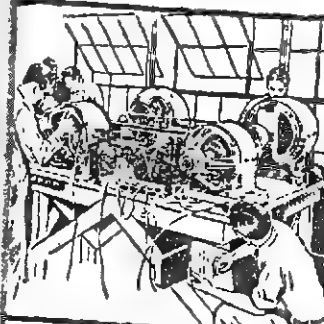


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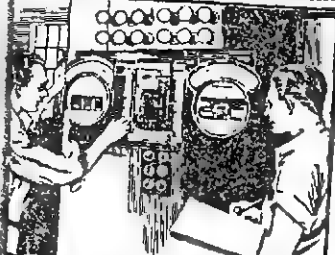
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ROUND-UP

SOME time ago, reckon it was nigh onto five months come last July 4, the boss of this pillar of poppycock took on, as an extra ranahan, an hombre with the handle of Half-pint. Half-pint, God rest his mis-begotten soul, hails from Socorro County, New Mexico. When he signed up for three sawbucks a month and grub with this BBW spread he vowed, by his dear, departed pappy, that he was a top-hand in the Western magazine business.

Well, after five months of Half-pint's presence, we take this opportunity to extend our sympathies to Socorro County, New Mexico. This shiftless, no-account son of a sidewinder has just about driven us loco. By next full moon, we'll be cutting out paper dolls.

You'll recall that he first got in our hair by rustling our brand new JB. Then, when he was ordered to dig up some palaver for the Round-Up column, he fell asleep on the job. Finally, to make matters worse, he cast aspersions on our knowledge of the types of saddles used in the Southwest. As it turned out, Half-pint was right about the saddles, but what the hell! We can't have him doing things like that. After all he only works for us.

But the other night this bow-legged, toad-faced squirt had the gall to inform us that, for two-bits and a shot of tequila, he'd sell the mighty City of New York back to the Indians.

We asked him why he opined that-away. And, brothers, Half-pint didn't mince talk at all.

"Folks in this-here Manhattan," said Half-pint, "are plumb loco." He pushed his sombrero back from a face that even the big town cannot pale, and continued. "These-here folks push a gent around, tromp on his boots an' elbow him in the guts like they was in a rush to catch the Devil himself. What're they in such an all-fired hurry for, anyhow?"

"Maybe," we hint broadly, "they got work to do. Of course you wouldn't know what that means."

Half-pint desecrated our nice, shiny office floor with a stream of brown 'baccy juice, then favored us with a contemptuous smile. "Shucks," he said, "back in Socorro County, New Mexico, folks got work to do, too. And believe you me, mister, round-up and branding and shipping are every whit's important as the things these pasty-faced dudes in this-here town got to 'tend to. An' don't you forget it."

We hurriedly placed our Stetson over Half-pint's recent expectoration so OUR boss wouldn't see what had happened to his floor. Then we said, "Well, go on. What else you got in your craw?"

"I," rasped New Mexico's sage, "have a hankering to really tell you what's wrong with this burg, but I ain't got time." He stopped chewing his chaw and stared at us with baleful eyes.

"Fer one thing," he continued, "some of yore red-eye wouldn't do fer hog-wash back in Socorro County. Fer another, yore wimmen use so much warpaint they plumb make a real range hand mad. Back home, gals don't use it and they look a helluva lot better."

At this last we almost choked on our quirkley. Not even women are safe from this wart.

"Guess Socorro is about perfect, Half-pint," we said.

He was silent a minute, his head turned, his eyes gazing out at the Empire State Building which, even Half-pint admits, is some shack. When he looked at us again, his eyes were sparkling and he was breathing hard.

"It ain't perfect," he said. "Ain't perfect, no-how. But we got mountains that are bigger and grander than the Empire State Building. We got air that makes this ozone rank with the inside of a pest-house. We got country where you can see fer miles, and where a man's free to ride if the fancy takes him. We got simple, belly-filling grub, not puny little sandwiches that cost you the price of a Socorro County steak."

"In short," Half-pint finished with a nostalgic sigh, "we can match everything you got in New York—and top it off with a lot more that you never dreamed of you damned city slicker!"

On second thought, we opine that Socorro County doesn't need our sympathy! Down there, they must be good, to have got rid of a pest like Half-pint.

(Continued from page 121)

a second time, smothered by the weight of numbers. He was weakening; salty blood was in his mouth. Something smashed his eyes, his brain burst into a spinning cart-wheel—and he dropped to oblivion.

How long he lay in the dusty street he couldn't tell. Something was sniffing at his face. It was a dog. He roused himself, groaned. The dog went yelping off.

Slowly, an inch at a time, he got up. Every movement was agony. He knew his lips were split, and one ear and his jaw felt smashed. But, looking around him and getting his bearings, he weaved off toward the Stockman's Hotel.

The bald-headed man, in a polka-dot shirt, drowsing in a chair at the desk, stirred, took one look at Pete and gripped the arms of his chair.

"Sufferin' Sarah!" he gasped. "What's the matter? Been drug by yore horse?"

"No," Pete managed. "Beat up. Gimme a bed, and some hot water."

Baldy grabbed him, lowered him into a chair and scuttled from the room. Pete heard him banging a pan in what was probably the kitchen. Later he returned with warm water, a rag and a bottle of iodine.

Pete didn't know Baldy from Adam but, to Pete, he was the original Good Samaritan. He bathed the wounds, dabbed on iodine, produced a bottle of whiskey and held it while Pete gulped a deep swig. Only then did he take time to ask questions.

"Feel better now?"

Pete nodded.

"Who climbed yuh?" Baldy asked.

"Three hombres I'm callin' on, some time soon."

"Know 'em?"

"I know 'em. And now, how's chances for the bed?"

With the beefy shoulder of the hotelman for support, Pete reached the floor above.

"I'll leave yuh the bottle," Baldy said. "She's the best comfort I know of for a feller in yore shape. I'll look you up in

the mornin'—to see if yuh're still alive."

Sheriff Cross was Pete's first visitor the next morning. He swore like hell. "Name 'em!" he roared. "Name me the polecats—and I'll do the rest!"

"Can't name anybody," Pete said. "It was too dark."

"Then guess at it!" Cross snarled. "Or shall I do the guessin' for yuh?"

Pete tried to smile. "Tell you, Sheriff; in this li'l matter, I'll do my own guessin' and my own settlin' up. I know you want to help, and I appreciate it; but you leave things to me."

The sheriff needed a lot of persuading. It was a pretty howdy-do, he opined, when a gent couldn't walk down the street without a gang o' cutthroats settin' onto him. But finally, and after much grunting through his shaggy mustache, Cross saw things Wallace's way.

"But if you want any help, son," he concluded, "or if the job's a bigger one than you figured it was, just deal me a hand in the game."

Pete stayed pretty close to the hotel for three days. Gradually his stiffness began to pass; and although his face was still many-hued, he could swing his arms and move his legs without ill-effect. On the fourth morning he paid his bill, thanked Baldy and got his horse out of the livery. With the morning sun in his face and cold vengeance in his heart, he headed for the Circle M.

It was fourteen miles, and he traveled slowly. It was nearly noon when he fogged up to the big pole gate with the Circle M sign and got his first look-see at the huge ranch-house, the great barns and the half-dozen corrals.

As he rode past the blacksmith's shop a tall, wide-shouldered man with a short-clipped mustache above a square and blue-shaven chin came out. The man shot a glance at Pete, frowned, nodded shortly. "H're yuh."

Pete nodded back. "Yeah—howdy."

Then: "You know anyone around here?"
"Should," allowed the man. "I hire 'em."

"Then mebbe you know a feller named Cheyenne Williams."

Ike Bailey jerked his head as a sign for Pete to follow, and led off to the bunkhouse. "Cheyenne!" he yelled. "Feller to see yuh!"

Pete sat on his strawberry-roan and waited. The horse wanted to nuzzle at a blade of grass growing beside the bunkhouse door but Pete held its head up. He might need sudden action.

He heard clumping bootheels, and a moment later the inquiring face of Cheyenne Williams was staring into Pete's—and into the muzzle of the .45 Pete held.

Chapter III

RUSTLERS RIDE UNSEEN

PETE grinned. "Hi, Cheyenne! Step outa there and get 'em up!"

Cheyenne shot an appealing look at Bailey, saw no help there, and sidled through the door, hands up level with his ears.

"Where's the others?" Pete rapped. "The Watling boys?"

Cheyenne stared malevolently. "Never heard of 'em."

Still covering Williams, Pete swung from the roan, legged it up to Cheyenne, said, "Ain't got a gun on you, eh? Well—" Pete slipped his own gun into its holster, unbuckled the belt and let gun and belt fall to the ground. "—neither have I!"

Pete went to work on him then. His fists caught him offguard and smashed him full in the face. Then he was all over him. He hooked and slugged and jabbed; rocked the bow-legged puncher dizzy. He finally floored him with an uppercut that traveled six inches and exploded like dynamite.

With Cheyenne rolling and groaning

and his senses beginning to return, the lone spectator turned to Pete.

"Me," he remarked. "I'm only the foreman of this spread and as such, don't cut much of a swathe round here. But if you'd care to tell me what it's all about, I'd listen."

Pete massaged his knuckles, gave the ghost of a smile. "I called this gent—" indicating Cheyenne "—and the Watling boys for a showdown in town the other night. They hadn't the guts to call me back. But in the dark, they sorta evened the score. The old face shows part of the job they did; and if you want me to shuck my shirt, I'll show you the rest of it."

The foreman nodded slowly. "Uh-huh." He surveyed Cheyenne, who was now sitting up and feeling his jaw. "You ain't done bad for a start; and if you want to make medicine with Curt and Ed, you can catch 'em at noon." He squinted at the sun. "Yeah; by the time you've put your horse away, things should be just about ready for you."

Pete stabled his horse, fed him and returned to the bunkhouse. There was no sign of Cheyenne. Big Ike Bailey was sitting in the shade, rolling a smoke. He nodded. "Come set down." He offered the makings. "Build one?"

They smoked in silence. With the cigarette half-finished, Pete heard the thudding of hoofs. Bailey nodded and Pete stood up to see three men ride in.

"Twins!" yelled Bailey; and two of the horses swung. And once more Pete looked on the pair that had faced him that night in the Oasis. "Friend o' yours—mebbe."

Pete had buckled on his gun again. With a thumb hooked in the belt above it, he walked the half-dozen paces till he stood between the two. He looked from one to the other, and saw the fear in their eyes.

"Remember me?" he asked.

The blond was on his left, the black-haired one on his right. Casually, Pete's

MAN-TAMER OF BUSHWHACK RANGE

hand went up to stroke the withers of the left-hand horse. The twins looked down at him, puzzled, anxious to make a move, but fearful of the consequences. "You remember me, all right," went on Pete. "So did Cheyenne. When Cheyenne gets around, talk things over with him. You'll find 'em interesting."

If the twins were puzzled, so was the red-haired puncher who was the third rider. So was Big Ike Bailey. But none was left in suspense very long. For while Pete had been speaking and stroking the horse, his hand had traveled. Now, he made a swoop and seized the gun from one twin's holster; his right hand, balled into a fist, smashed the other twin from the saddle.

The riderless horse reared, snorted. As the black-haired twin got to his feet, Pete knocked him groggy with a vicious haymaker.

The other twin swung his horse and tried to ride Pete down.

Pete grabbed the headstall; and now, thoroughly roused, he seized the blond by the belt and upset him. What followed then was but a repetition of all that had happened to Cheyenne—save that the twins showed far less fight. In half a minute Pete had reaped full satisfaction for all that had been visited on himself. Then, breathing heavily, he nodded to Ike Bailey.

"Guess that squares things," he said. "And thanks for the cooperation."

"Don't mention it," Bailey said. "Always willin' to oblige." Then, when Pete was turning toward the barn, he halted him. "But what's the rush? Cook says dinner's ready. Come and get it before he throws it in the creek."

NEITHER Cheyenne nor the twins put in an appearance at the meal, but seven other men did. They nodded shortly to Pete and went to work at the job in hand. At the conclusion of the meal,

Pete went outside for a smoke. Ike Bailey followed.

"Workin'?" Bailey asked.

"No."

"Want to work?"

"Sure."

"You're hired. The Circle M pays forty and grub."

A smile spread over Pete's battered face. "Just like that. Don't need any references—where I done time last, or whose little dogies I rustled?"

Bailey shrugged. "None of my affair—up till now. But with shippin' startin' in a couple weeks time, the Circle M can use a gent who knows his way around." He jerked his head toward the bunkhouse. "I see you got your warbag. Help yourself to any stall that's empty in there. You can start work in the mornin'."

"Never mind the mornin'," said Pete. "When I'm hired, I work."

Bailey, who never seemed surprised, merely shrugged. "O. K. Come on."

He led the way to a small warehouse, dug up a sack of staples, an ax and a hammer. "Grab 'em," he ordered, "and let's see what sort of a fencer you are." He pointed through the open doorway to a three-wire fence that began at the barns and traveled south and out of sight over the hills. "That's our west line," he stated. "Anythin' west of that belongs to the JN outfit. The JN and us don't get along. Mebbe Newton can explain why the fence is always down and we're shy of cattle. I can't. But there's your job. She runs seven miles south."

Pete got his roan from the barn, saddled and began his new job. He rode slowly for an hour before he found any damage to the fence; then he came to a place where the top strand had snapped and the second was sagging. He had baling wire along, so went to work. As he worked he took an occasional glance around.

Here, on Circle M land, was a flat stretch of sand and sage that terminated

four miles away against a rampart of red cliffs. Even for Wyoming, the country looked dry; and far off to the east was a spidery windmill-tower that proved Jack Newton's reference to the Circle M's method of procuring water.

To the west, however, on JN land, things were different. Close by, the sand was equally parched-looking; but a little farther on was a gently-sloping valley, green with grass and threaded by a ribbon of cottonwoods. Cottonwood Creek; the creek that Jack Newton had spoken of; the ever-flowing water-supply that had become the bone of contention between the Circle M and Jack Newton's spread.

Working, Pete glanced up again to see a rider moving along the creek. Pete gave him little attention, for he seemed to be riding in the opposite direction. But when, five minutes later, his horse whinnied, he looked up once more. The rider was not more than fifty yards away; and Pete noticed, with a little surge of pleasure, that the rider was Dot Newton.

Pete straightened, shoved the hat onto the back of his head. "Mornin', Miss Newton," he smiled. "Who'd think of meetin' you 'way out here?"

But there was no answering smile on the face of the girl. She frowned for a moment at his battered countenance. "So," she observed at last, "you *did* get a job?"

Pete seemed puzzled. "Sure I got a job. Didn't I say I was looking for one?"

"And I hope it suits you. Ike Bailey can always do with a man of your talents."

The contempt in her voice and the look in her eyes almost floored Pete. "My talents?" he echoed.

"Yes, of course. You're handy with a gun, aren't you?"

Something hot began to burn around Pete's neck. This cool-eyed girl with the stubborn chin was wilfully trying to misbrand him. O. K., then; he'd meet her!

He grinned lazily. "I guess you called the turn. Remember saying you'd like to

be on hand the next time I ran into Cheyenne and the Watling boys? You weren't there, but it happened. And those talents you spoke about came in handy. Ike saw the sample; and we closed a deal."

Dot flushed. Her eyes were hot and furious.

"He would," she said. "I know Ike Bailey. And I think," she added with brittle scorn, "I'm beginning to understand you."

CHEYENNE and the Watlings were at headquarters when Pete arrived that evening. They said nothing, but Cheyenne looked his hate. The other men seemed more friendly, however, and Pete decided that his run-in with Cheyenne and his companions had been spread around.

Next day Ike sent Pete to a line-camp eight miles southwest. He was told that a man was there already, one Spotty Foster. Spotty was gathering up strays, and would return to headquarters in a couple of days. "So go help him," Ike said.

Cheyenne was standing nearby. Big Ike noticed this. "Yeah," Big Ike went on. "I got to keep you two sidewinders separated for a spell. So you, Cheyenne, and the twins, get busy and fix up that pasture fence."

Pete rode away. Not far from headquarters he noticed a bunch of thirty or forty head of prime beef-stock grazing together. They were steers, sleek and fat. With shipping time coming up, a few carloads of these would pay big dividends. He rode on, and when three miles away he pulled up shortly. All the tobacco he owned in the world was the quarter-full sack of Durham in the left-hand pocket of his shirt.

This was bad. Pete, when he had to, could go without grub and without sleep for many hours on end. But he couldn't get along without a smoke. Not, anyway, for the two days he would be with Spotty Foster. On the other hand, Big Ike or

the cook would probably keep a supply at headquarters. The only thing to do was to turn back.

He reached the ranch-buildings, rode around a barn and found Cheyenne and the Watlings saddling their horses in the corral. Big Ike was there also.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Thought I told you to hit for the line-camp?"

Pete nodded. "Keep your shirt on," he told Big Ike coolly. "I'm going—as soon as I get some tobacco. Don't figure on being without a smoke for two full days."

Big Ike subsided. "Pity you wouldn't think of that before. Got any?"

"No."

"See the cook. Tell him to charge it up to you."

Pete got the tobacco. When he rode past the corral again, only the foreman and the three saddled horses were in sight.

"Get it?" the ramrod called.

Pete nodded.

"Well," Bailey said, "fog along. Spotty shoulda had help long ago."

Pete rode away, wondering. The loss of an hour shouldn't have put the man off-balance. Pete tried to figure out what had gotten into Bailey's hair.

"WHAT'S the matter with him?" snarled Spotty Foster, an old, wizened cowhand, when Wallace told him a few things later in the day. "And who said I wanted help? I got danged near all the strays together."

Pete smiled. "With Jack Newton doin' all the rustlin', mebbe Ike's gettin' worried about all these loners out here."

"Jack Newton rustlin'!" Old Spotty jabbed at the steaks he was frying on the stove. "I've heard that tune till it's just wore me out. Jack ain't rustlin' no hundred head a month."

"But Ike says the stock is going some place."

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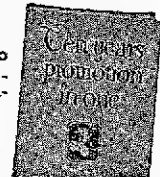
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Sure it's goin' some place. But Jack ain't gettin' it."

"Then who is?"

"How should I know? And I never made it my job to find out."

With the strays already bunched, there was little to do but hold them together and Pete turned his mind to some heavy thinking. From Spotty Foster he found that the Circle M's neighbors were supposedly honest. If rustlers were operating, they were a gang who struck quickly and made their getaway unseen.

He found also that the losses were generally thirty or forty head at a time. Thirty or forty head made him think of the bunch of fat stuff he had seen a little way from headquarters that morning. Hooked up with this came the thought that, instead of fixing the pasture fence, Cheyenne and the twins were saddled up and going places. And lastly, but perhaps not altogether coincidentally, Big Ike had seemed much disturbed when Pete Wallace had appeared on the scene.

"Ike was telling me," Wallace said to Foster as they rode along, "that they'd be shipping before long. Where does he ship from?"

"Cactus Sidin'."

"And where's Cactus Sidin'?"

"Due east of here, about seventeen miles." Old Spotty suddenly became informative. "There's a new railroad goin' through to Casper, and loadin' chutes have been built at the Sidin'. When it comes to that, the chutes and the corrals is all the Sidin' amounts to."

"You mean nobody's living there?"

"Not a soul—only the read-runners and the prairie-dogs."

After a pause, Pete said he'd like to see a bit of the country roundabout. Old Spotty gave a quiet chuckle. "Want to see the country, eh? Well, help yourself to lots of it. And if Cactus Sidin' interests you in partickler, it lays right over there

MAN-TAMER OF BUSHWHACK RANGE

133

—plumb through that notch in the hills."

Pete shot the old rawhider a sharp glance. "Now what d'you mean by that?"

Spotty grinned. "Go ahead, feller. Mebbe I'm crazy. But if I was a bit younger and a bit more ambitious, I'd go along with yuh."

Chapter IV

BUSHWHACK TRAIL

BY THE little of him he had seen, Pete thoroughly approved of Spotty Foster. Spotty was like many another who had spent all his life on the range. He was easy-going, straight as a string, but extraordinarily shrewd. Though Pete had tried to sound casual in his remark regarding seeing the country, old Spotty had put two and two together and was making a long guess.

"And the next thing," said Pete, "he'll be guessing things about me."

By forcing the pace of his strawberry-roan, and by keeping away from the skylines, Pete made the notch in the hills without meeting anyone. When he got there the sun was setting; and in the dust of the trail between the red walls he saw where a bunch of cattle and several mounted men had passed through. He picked his way carefully, and when he came through the notch he saw a line of telegraph-poles, a little more than three miles off. He saw, too, the whitewashed walls of a loading chute.

Halfway to the chute, a cloud of dust hung in the air. He waited, then coming out of a valley and crawling up the side of a hill, he made out a bunch of driven cattle. At a mile and a half he distinguished three men on horses.

In fifteen minutes the sun had dropped behind the horizon. In thirty minutes it was dark and stars were out. He touched the roan with the spurs and rode on. Soon he heard the bawling of cattle and the

harsh yells of men. He swung off, tied the reins to a low bush and inched forward. The chute and the bawling and the yells were now but a hundred yards or so away. He crept on again, and made out two cattle-cars in the siding. He gave a satisfied nod. "Uh-huh, Ike," Wallace said to himself. "And you told me that shipping wouldn't start for two weeks."

Now came other sounds; the stamp of hoofs on hollow boards and the clicking of horns; the squeaking of a sliding-door and the clatter of metal falling into place and, finally, the distant blast of a locomotive.

Crouched behind a bit of scrub, Pete again heard voices. A match flared as a man lit a cigarette. And, back where he was tied, Pete's roan gave a high-pitched whinny. Pete tensed.

"What's that?" the unseen man said. "Let's find out!" his pard said.

Pete turned and started to run but blundered over a rock and went sprawling into a cactus clump. Bullets—six or seven of them—suddenly sang about his ears. But he reached his horse, swung into the saddle, and, flattening out on Baldy's neck, went streaking off into the darkness.

WALLACE reached the line-camp at ten o'clock, picketed Baldy, walked into the cabin and found old Spotty Foster sprawled on a bunk. The old man quirked an eyebrow.

"Back, eh? Locate the Sidin'?"

"Among other things—yeah."

"Run into any trouble?"

"Only what a cactus-spine'll cause you," Pete said. "Got a knife?"

Foster rooted into a pocket. "Ain't you got one of your own?"

"Did have," Pete said. "Now it's in the cactus clump."

The spine was deeply embedded in Pete's hand. Old Spotty helped it out. "Cactus clump, eh?" he grunted. "What was you doin' there?"

"Fell into it," Pete told him. "That's likely where the knife went, and some loose change I had in my pocket."

Pete sat down at the table to eat and listen to Spotty fish for news.

"Yuh made good time," Foster observed.

"Had to," Pete said. "Leastways, comin' back. Nothing like three gun-slingin' hombres on a feller's tail to help him fog along."

"Three of 'em, eh?" Spotty debated the point for a moment, then chuckled. "Yeah. Three would be about right. And seems like you'n me had the same hunch about things."

Pushing the rounded-up strays before them, they reached headquarters about noon next day. They found Bailey alone.

"Didn't expect you back till tomorrow," the ramrod observed.

"Today's Saturday—pay-day," Foster reminded him. "Or ain't a feller s'posed to go to town after a hard week's work?"

Big Ike nodded. "Guess I forgot about that."

The twins and Cheyenne showed up at dinner-time. Across the table, Cheyenne gave Pete a keen, low-lidded glance. He said nothing, however, and Pete gave no sign that he was aware of Cheyenne's scrutiny.

After chow, Bailey paid off and ordered two men, Buck Connors and Slim Fields, to stick around. The rest, the boss said, were free to hit for Buffalo City, if they felt like it. Pete and Foster struck out for town ten minutes later.

FREE of Spotty, Pete walked to the Buffalo City railway depot, grabbed a pad of telegraph blanks, wrote out a couple of messages and handed them to the agent. One was addressed to a bank in Laramie, the other to the railway traffic manager at Casper.

"Send these off at once," Wallace told the operator. "And when you get replies,

hang onto 'em till I come to pick 'em up."

"The agent read the messages, frowned, said, "Sure, I'll do that."

Pete looked at the man for a long time, finally he said, "How d'you play 'em—pretty close to your chest?"

"If we didn't," the agent replied slowly, "we wouldn't hold the job very long."

Pete nodded, walked out, crossed to the Oasis and dropped into a vacant chair on the porch. He sat there for a while, then saw a rider coming down the street. The rider was Jack Newton.

Newton rode up to the saloon hitchrail, gave Pete a brusque nod and dismounted. As he came up the steps, Pete spoke. "Me," he said, "I'm funny. If I've got a grudge against a man, I come out with it. How about you?"

Newton shrugged. "Dunno how I am. But if it's regardin' who a feller works for—that's his own affair."

"I figured it was," Pete admitted.

Newton seemed to lose some of his stiffness. "Dot told me she peeled you down the other day. I told her it was none of our affair—that if we couldn't hire a man, we couldn't kick about him workin' for someone else."

"Sure," said Pete. "And you can tell her that if she catches me bustin' your fence or chousin' your stock, she's welcome to plug me on sight."

Dot's brother grinned at that. "I told her so already. Even mentioned that you were sorta different than Big Ike and his gang."

"And what did she say?"

"Want to know?" Newton hesitated a moment. Then: "She said if you played with the curs, you'd catch their fleas."

Pete deliberated that one. Then he, too, grinned. "She did, eh? That's sorta rough, but as long as she didn't say I was one of the curs, seems like I still got a chance."

Pete was buying himself a jack-knife in the General store a little later, when Big Ike walked in. The foreman nodded and

Man-Tamer of Bushwhack Range

passed on into the office where a bald-headed, hooknosed man was poring over a book of accounts. Wallace looked after the ramrod, shrugged and left the store with his new knife. His mind was working overtime as he crossed the dusty street.

NIGHT had fallen and the Oasis was filled. Pete, Bailey and three other punchers were playing poker when Jack Newton came in. His face was grim as he walked over to Big Ike.

"Want to see you, Bailey," Newton said savagely. "Where can we go?"

"We can't go nowhere just now," Big Ike said. "And anything you got to say, you can say here."

Newton's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Okay! I've just seen Izzy Bernstein."

Big Ike seemed interested. "Thasso? And what's Izzy got to say?"

"You know what he had to say. He told me you'd taken over that note of mine."

"Note of yours? Oh, yeah. That note for a thousand bucks. Sure I took it over."

Jack Newton seemed to be trying to control himself. "Six months ago, Izzy told me he'd renew it for another year. Now you own it. What d'you say?"

"What do I say?" Bailey sneered with hard lips. "I ain't sayin' anything like that. All I'm sayin' is that the note is due in a week's time, and I ain't foolin' with you no more than I ever did."

"I was expectin' something like that," the JN boss rasped. "In other words, I got to sell every cow I own on the place to square you, or you'll walk in."

"It's tough," Big Ike admitted. "But you've summed up things plumb neatly."

Pete expected action as he cleared his spurs from the legs of his chair. But Newton had another question.

"Where is that note?" he asked.

"Where is it?" echoed Big Ike. "Right here in my pocket. And she can go into yours as soon as yuh settle."

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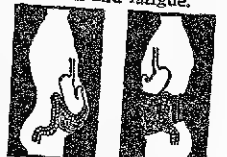
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

As Jack Newton's hand inched toward the gun at his waist Pete Wallace saw Cheyenne Williams materialize half a dozen paces behind Newton, his fingers on the butt of his six-shooter. Jack didn't have a chance. If he drew on Ike, Cheyenne would get him. It was all arranged.

Wallace looked across at Cheyenne, nodded bleakly, said, "All right, Williams. Cut me in on the deal." His voice shattered the spell that gripped the place.

Cheyenne blinked twice, let his hand drop hastily as Jack Newton looked around.

Pete smiled at Big Ike Bailey. "Sorry if I broke things up, but our friend over there was gettin' spooky. And if he can't handle a .45 better than he can handle his dukes, we were all in considerable danger."

Big Ike glared murderously for a moment, then took a cue from Pete's words. "Cheyenne?" He looked around. "What's the matter with Cheyenne?"

Cheyenne said, "Nothin's the matter with me. He's the gent that's gettin' spooky! I dunno even what he's talkin' about!"

Pete shot a quick glance at Newton, shrugged. "Mebbe I was mistaken. Yeah, mebbe I was. But what's all the fuss, anyway. Let's get on with the game."

The game continued until Newton left the saloon. Then Pete suggested they cash in. He said to Big Ike, "Guess I'll hit home. Comin' or stayin'?" He wanted to be with Big Ike, at least until he was sure Jack Newton had definitely gone.

Big Ike shook his head. "Not for a while. Got a couple other fellers to see first."

The night was clear and the moon was sinking in the West when Wallace left the Oasis. Instead of hitting for the Circle M, he walked over to the depot.

Wallace read the two telegrams the agent gave him, then said with a nod of satisfaction, "Crazy old world, ain't it?"

MAN-TAMER OF BUSHWHACK RANGE

137

The agent agreed. "Lot of crazy people in it, too."

Pete found Jerry McNeil, a deputy, in Sheriff Cross's office. Cross, McNeil said, had gone to see a man a few miles from town, but was expected back any moment. Pete had grub at the cafe. When he went back to the office Cross was there.

Wallace told Cross of the run-in between Newton and Bailey over the note. Ike's intended foreclosure of Jack's property had a distant connection with the telegrams Pete had received. Pete told Cross other things, too.

Cross nodded grimly. "There's more than a chance that Ike figures you're the man that saw the loadin' over at Cactus Siding. If we're goin' to make medicine with him at all, we'd better do it right away."

Pete agreed. "He must have cleaned up considerable at Circle M expense. Might pay him to vamoose with what he's got rather than chance it any longer."

When Cross and Pete left the Oasis, the bartender said Ike had left only a little while before. "Said he was goin' home," the man informed them.

Pete, out of earshot of the barkeep, looked at the sheriff. Cross shrugged, said, "Sure we'll take after him. He's slippery, and we don't know what's in his mind."

Pete got his horse from the livery and met the sheriff a few minutes later. A mile and a half from town their ponies slithered to a stop, snorting and wheeling, trying to bolt for it. The sheriff fought his hammer-headed gelding.

"Whatsa matter with yuh, anyway?" he growled. "Scared of a jack-rabbit?"

Pete stared ahead. "That's no jack-rabbit!" he blurted. "It's a man!"

They swung down, led their blowing horses closer to the figure sprawled across the road, arms outspread.

The sheriff handed the reins of his horse to Pete. "Hold him, till I take a look,"

he ordered, and went forward and rolled the man onto his back.

In the flickering light of a match Pete recognized him. It was Big Ike Bailey.

Chapter V

TRIAL BY FIRE

BAILEY was dead as a ham. A bullet had caught him clean through the heart. Another match showed a puddle of blood beneath him.

The sheriff stood up, grunted. "We didn't see Ike soon enough." Then: "What'll we do now?"

"Bring him to town, I suppose," Pete said.

They reached the lockup from the rear, carried Big Ike inside and laid him on the floor.

"Guess I'd better search him," the sheriff said.

The search produced tobacco and papers, a bulging wallet, some loose coins—and Pete Wallace's knife.

Pete stared at the blade he had lost at Cactus Siding. He would know it anywhere. The handle was chipped and there were two crosses on it, filed there as identification. But how did it come into Big Ike's possession? Who had blundered on to the thing, out there in that desolation of sage and sand?

Cross broke up Pete's thoughts. "Yuh told me," he said, "that Ike had that note on him in the saloon. It ain't here now."

Pete frowned. "You sure?" "I turned all his pockets out, didn't I?"

The two men looked long and hard at each other. Cross broke the long silence. "If Jack Newton ain't around town, I'm ridin' out to his place for a talk with him. Want to come along?"

Pete smiled thinly. "Got your mind made up already?"

The sheriff evaded the question. "Comin'?"

Jack Newton was not in town, but in searching for him they came across Deputy Jerry McNeil. The sheriff informed him of the murder, told him to stay in the office until he, the sheriff, got back.

It was twelve miles out to Jack Newton's spread, and the man seemed to be asleep when they arrived. The sheriff pounded on the door, and in a few moments Newton came down. He was barefooted, dressed in pants and shirt, and carried a lamp in his hand.

"Hiyah, Jack," said the sheriff solemnly. "Can we come in?"

Inside, Cross wasted no time. "We found Big Ike a bit this side of town. He was dead—drilled through the heart."

Jack Newton stared. After a moment he said, "Big Ike killed?" Then: "Who killed him?"

"Of course, Jack," Cross said slowly, "you wouldn't know?"

Newton seemed puzzled, but when the inference of it hit him, his eyes went hard. "How should I know?" he flared.

"Ike had a note of yours on him tonight," Joe Cross said. "I wish I knew where it went."

"Wasn't it on him?" Newton demanded. "You mean—someone took it?"

"I guess I do."

There was a second of thick silence, then Newton blew up. "What the hell's all this, anyhow?" he barked. "Are you hintin' I killed that hombre to get my note back? If you are, you're crazy!"

From above Pete's head came the squeak of a board and a moment later Dot Newton appeared, a blanket wrapped around her night-clothes. Pete could see she was shivery. Her face, framed by two thick ropes of plaited hair, was pale.

"I heard what you said, Sheriff," she said. "But you can't think Jack had any hand in this murder?"

Joe Cross looked uncomfortable; but

he was also stubborn. "I can only think what my eyes and my ears tell me to," he pointed out. "I'll work on the murder, and Jack will get all the breaks that're comin' to him; but in the meantime I'll have to hold him."

"You—you're goin' to arrest me?" A lump went up and down in Jack Newton's throat; then his jaw hardened and he wheeled on his sister. "Get outa here, Dot," he ordered. "I'll handle this myself."

"Don't be an idiot!" Dot cried. "Fighting won't get you anywhere. It'll only brand you as guilty!"

"Guilty!" snarled Jack. "I might just as well be guilty, for all the show I'll get. The set-up's against me. I hated Ike, I argued with him, and then this note of mine that he took over has disappeared. What'd a jury say?"

"But it ain't got to the jury yet," Sheriff Cross pointed out. "We'll do all we can to see it don't get that far."

"Who's 'we'?" Newton demanded. "You—and him?" With a sneer he jerked his head toward Pete Wallace. "Him—a Circle M man?"

"A Circle M man," Cross agreed. "But at the same time, a man who's saved your skin once already tonight. That is, if what I heard about your quarrel with Big Ike in the Oasis was true." And when Jack Newton's eyes wavered, he added: "So you'd better get your stuff together, Jack, and ride into town with us."

But it was the girl who made the decision. "We'll be with you, Sheriff—just as soon as we can get dressed."

THE first streak of dawn was lighting the east when they reached Buffalo City. The Oasis was still open and as they approached, a dozen men came boiling out. Pete heard the voice of Cheyenne Williams.

"There they are! Grab the pair of 'em!"

The crowd surged across the sidewalk, out onto the street. Men drove between

Man-Tamer of Bushwhack Range

Pete's horse and the sheriff's. Pete felt hands dragging at his legs, trying to pull him down. Newton cursed. The girl gave a frightened little cry.

But above all came the roaring of Joe Cross. "What's comin' off here?" he howled. "You hombres try any rough-stuff with me—" He drew his gun, smashed the barrel of it over a man's head and was away, Dot beside him. "Ride!" he yelled at Pete and Newton. "Make a run for the jail!"

Pete lifted the roan. The horse reared, smashed out with its forefeet. Pete crowded alongside Newton, pivoted in the saddle and snapped a shot at the mob.

As they stormed inside the jail, Cross bellowed at Jerry McNeil to bar the door. "There's a killin' mob out there!" he roared. "But if it's trouble they want, I'll give it to 'em!"

The tramp of boots, the shouts and curses of men could be heard on the jail's porch.

Hard-faced, Pete Wallace drew his gun, looked at Dot. "Back in there, somewhere!" he ordered. "The bullets are goin' to fly!"

The mob were yelling and pounding. A fearsome thing to hear. The voice of Cheyenne Williams came above the rest, "If they won't open the door, get some kerosene and burn 'em out!"

The yelling grew louder. Side by side stood Pete and the sheriff. Their guns were in their hands. "Ready?" Pete asked.

But before Cross could reply, something crashed against the door and burst it in. It was the rail of a hitching-rack, used as a battering-ram. Knowing that death stared them in the face, the sheriff yelled to Jack and his sister to escape by the rear door. Then he and Pete fired blindly.

They fired one shot apiece, but one was not enough. Men screamed, pitched forward, and their mates trampled over them.

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Pete was on the point of shooting again, but he knew that firing into a liquor-crazed mob could only amount to murder. And while he hesitated, the mob gained the upper hand.

It swept in like a flooded river, carrying Pete and the sheriff before it. Both men fought desperately, swinging their guns as clubs. Pete's idea—and he knew it was shared by the sheriff—was to hold the mob until Jack and his sister could get away. In the uproar, the table went over and the lamp exploded.

Hell broke loose. Blazing oil coursed along the floor-boards, caught on a newspaper, leaped up and seized a file of official documents that Joe Cross had hanging on the wall. Pete clawed at the papers, shattered the window and heaved them outside. And in doing so he wrought greater destruction. Someone, too drunk to know what he was doing, had acted on Cheyenne's orders. Kerosene had been sprayed on the outer walls. This took hold; in a moment the lock-up was a blazing inferno.

SUDDENLY sobered, those inside now fought to get out. They jammed the doors, front and back; cursed, howled, smashed at each other in a frenzy of fear. Pete had already sized up the window. The frame was blazing, but it offered a way to safety. He nudged the sheriff, was turning for it when he suddenly caught sight of Cheyenne.

Cheyenne had been one of the first to force his way into the lock-up; now he was the most frantic of those trying to escape. Pete grabbed him.

"Out the window!" he yelled at him.

Cross read Pete's intent. "Lemme out first! I'll nab him when he comes!"

The sheriff seized a chair and smashed the burning frame. Yanking his hat over his eyes, he drove through. Cheyenne went next. Pete followed.

But Cross miscalculated Cheyenne's landing. Cheyenne crashed into the sheriff and knocked the feet from under him. By the time that Pete got through and into action, Cheyenne was fifty yards away.

Pete fired twice, and missed. Then he started off in fierce pursuit.

At first he had the light of the blazing lock-up, but when Cheyenne turned into the street, and they got away from the fire, Pete found that the gray of early morning had come. He could see Cheyenne racing for three saddled horses outside the Oasis. Pete threw a couple of more shots, and cursed himself. Running, he could not aim—he was merely emptying his gun.

But the shots had some effect on Cheyenne. Instead of grabbing a horse he dove through the doors of the lighted saloon. Pete rammed two shells into the cylinder of his .45 and followed.

He gained on the fleeing puncher. He smashed open the doors of the place just as Cheyenne drew level with the bar. Cheyenne heard him—wheeled—fired. One of the bullets zipped through Pete's shirt and burned his ribs. Pete shot once, and Cheyenne went down in a heap.

AT FIRST Pete thought he had killed him. Gun in hand, he moved forward. But Cheyenne was not dead. The man had been standing half-turned. Pete's bullet had hit the big brass buckle of his belt, glanced off and buried itself in the side of the stout bar. But it had winded Cheyenne; and now he crawled up, holding his belly and staring.

"Looks like I missed," said Pete. "And it's just as well. Now you're goin' to hang!"

There was a commotion as Sheriff Cross and a dozen of the would-be lynchmen barged into the place. The fire and their narrow escape had sobered them. Some came because they had seen the pursuit

enter the Oasis, others merely wanted a drink. But they all pulled up abruptly at the scene before them.

Cheyenne's breath was coming back. He got up, and the look on his face turned to one of surprise at finding himself unwounded. When he faced Pete, it changed to savage hate.

"Yeah," drawled Pete. "I'm glad I didn't kill you. Like I said, you're goin' to hang—and hang for the murder of Ike Bailey."

Cheyenne gave a start. His lips lifted. "You're locoed!" he sneered. "Or drunk! What'd I want to kill Ike fer?"

"You didn't want to kill him," said Pete. "You thought you were killin' me!"

There was another movement. Cheyenne's eyes darted hopefully to the door. Pete couldn't chance turning, but he heard Jack Newton's voice.

"Hold it, Pete! If you're gunnin' that polecat on my account, you needn't. I'm here."

Pete spoke over his shoulder. "Figured you'd be okay. But this is something else." Fixing his eyes on Cheyenne, he went on again. "Like I said, you thought you were killin' me. And you had reason to. Want to know the reason? You, Big Ike and a few more gents have shipped over five hundred head of Circle M cows."

"I saw you doin' it that night—and you know I saw you. It was a neat job. Not only were you and Ike in it, but the train crew was in it too. A couple of telegrams told me a lot. And the day after I got away from you at the leading-chutes, you rode back there to pick up sign." Pete gave a thin, hawkish grin. "What you did pick up was my jack-knife."

Cheyenne batted his eyes and the muscles of his unshaven jaw bulged into little knots. But he forced a wolfish sneer. "If this is s'posed t' interest me..."

"Keep listenin'," advised Pete. "You'll be plenty interested before I'm done. And I was talking about that jack-knife. You

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hand it over to Big Ike. He couldn't identify it, but he suspected me. I know that much. For I made the bad mistake of blundering onto you and the Watling boys saddling up when you were supposed to be fixing fences.

"Big Ike figured, then, that I was spying on him. And if he wanted definite proof, he got it when he walked into Izzy Bernstein's store and found me buying a jack-knife to take the place of the one I lost.

"I should have had sense enough to worry about that missing jack-knife. But somehow I didn't. It could have put me in a bad spot. Mebbe it did. But no tougher a spot than Big Ike found himself in when he knew I was onto his game.

"So last night, when I said I was ridin' home, he hunted you up. He told you to get up the road ahead of me, and bush-whack me when I came along. But too bad for Ike, I didn't go so soon. He went ahead of me, the light was poor—and you finished your job!"

Cheyenne's eyes had narrowed to mere slits. His lips drew in, his jaws bulged more than ever. "Slick!" he snarled. "Slicker'n frog's hair, this yarn you're tellin'. But how you gonna prove it?"

Pete staked all on a bluff. He thought he knew Cheyenne, thought he knew him to be long-headed and cool. Cheyenne, when he made the discovery that he had killed the wrong man, would not get panicky or rattled. Knowing that the killing of Big Ike would raise considerable of a stir, something had to be done about it. If he himself were not to be involved, another suspect would have to be produced. And what better suspect than Jack Newton?

Pete told Cheyenne all this. "So you know what you did? You took Jack's note out of Big Ike's pocket to make things appear bad for Jack. And the note is in your own pocket right now!"

The bluff worked. Into Cheyenne's face came the desperate look of a cornered

wolf. He was unarmed; his gun lay where it had fallen at his feet; and on the faces of those who, earlier, had been his allies, sat now only a look of sullen disgust.

Then his eyes dropped. He seemed to sway. With a groan, he collapsed.

A man laughed sneeringly. "Fainted! There's guts fer yuh!"

Sheriff Cross moved over to do a job that now was his.

Pete Wallace holstered his gun.

None were looking for trickery. None expected it. But as the sheriff stooped down, Cheyenne's fingers closed over the .45. He grabbed it, sprang up and fired—not at the sheriff, but at Pete.

The slug hit Pete a smashing blow in the shoulder. Three inches lower, and it would have killed him. The force of the bullet spun him around, and the second bullet missed him entirely. But hit though he was, his own hand streaked to the holster at his side. For a wounded man it was a lightning move—a swoop down, a zipping upward arc, a blast of fire. . . .

This time, when Cheyenne went down, all the guns in the world couldn't help him. . . .

THERE was no doctor in Buffalo City, but many a bullet wound had been treated by Sheriff Joe Cross. So now, with a jolt of rye for a bracer, Pete Wallace had to submit to a probing and a digging that brought a mushroomed .45 bullet to light. The operation was performed in the New York Cafe and, aiding the sheriff, were Dot Newton and Deputy Jerry McNeil. Jack Newton was present also, but merely in the role of a spectator.

Pete was thankful for the rye. He needed it. And as an antidote to the pain, he tried to tell a bit more.

"Spotty Foster out at the line-camp helped me a lot. Big Ike and Cheyenne never knew it, but Spotty was a real Myles Edwards' man. Old Myles got a bit suspicious when the cattle returns didn't show

Man-Tamer of Bushwhack Range

what they ought, so he had Spotty hire out with Big Ike and keep his eyes and ears open. Spotty didn't know me, but he put two-and-two together pretty well."

Dot Newton was holding Pete's arm while the sheriff started in on the bandaging. Now and again a strand of her hair tickled Pete's nose, and the touch sent little pulsations through him.

"Y'know, Miss Newton," he said, "you blamed Myles Edwards for a lot of things you shouldn't have done. Myles Edwards never had anything against you. He never tried to run you off, nor ruin you in any way. All that can be charged up to Big Ike Bailey's account. He wanted your spread—and why not? He had cleaned up several thousand by rustling Circle M stock, and your place would have suited him fine."

Now the girl's curiosity got the better of her. "How do you know so much about Myles Edwards? And just who are you? A range detective—for the Cattlemen's Association?"

"Who, me?" Pete laughed headily, partly from the effects of the probing, partly out of sheer joy. "I'm no detective of any kind. I'm old Myles Edwards' son."

Shocked, Dot let his arm fall. He winced, and at once she was sympathetic. "I'm sorry, but . . . but you said your name was Wallace!"

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

"So it is—Peter Wallace Edwards, if you want it all." He managed to grin up at her. "And as I told you, Arizona is my stamping ground. Down there I run another spread for the old man. But he sent me up here on this special duty."

The girl looked across at her brother, up at the grinning sheriff.

"And when I uttered those mean things about your father, you never said a word."

"Remember the time I was fixin' the fence?" Pete asked her. "Well—what did you say about me?"

She blushed, hotly. Pete's heart began to pound. He didn't know this girl very well, but did he want to? He'd tell a man! And there was just one way he could get to know her.

"You asked me, one time, to come out and visit you. I said I'd like to, but a job came first. I found the job, and it's finished. But the invitation—does it still hold good?"

Out through the window, a light shot up. It was a final surge of the flames that had been a funeral pyre for Big Ike Bailey. The girl missed this, however. She was looking down at Pete and blushing more rosily than ever.

"After what you did for Jack? And for me? Come out," she said, "at any time. And stay as long as you like."

THE END

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(Continued)

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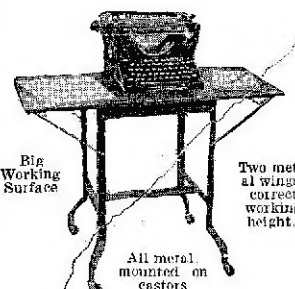
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